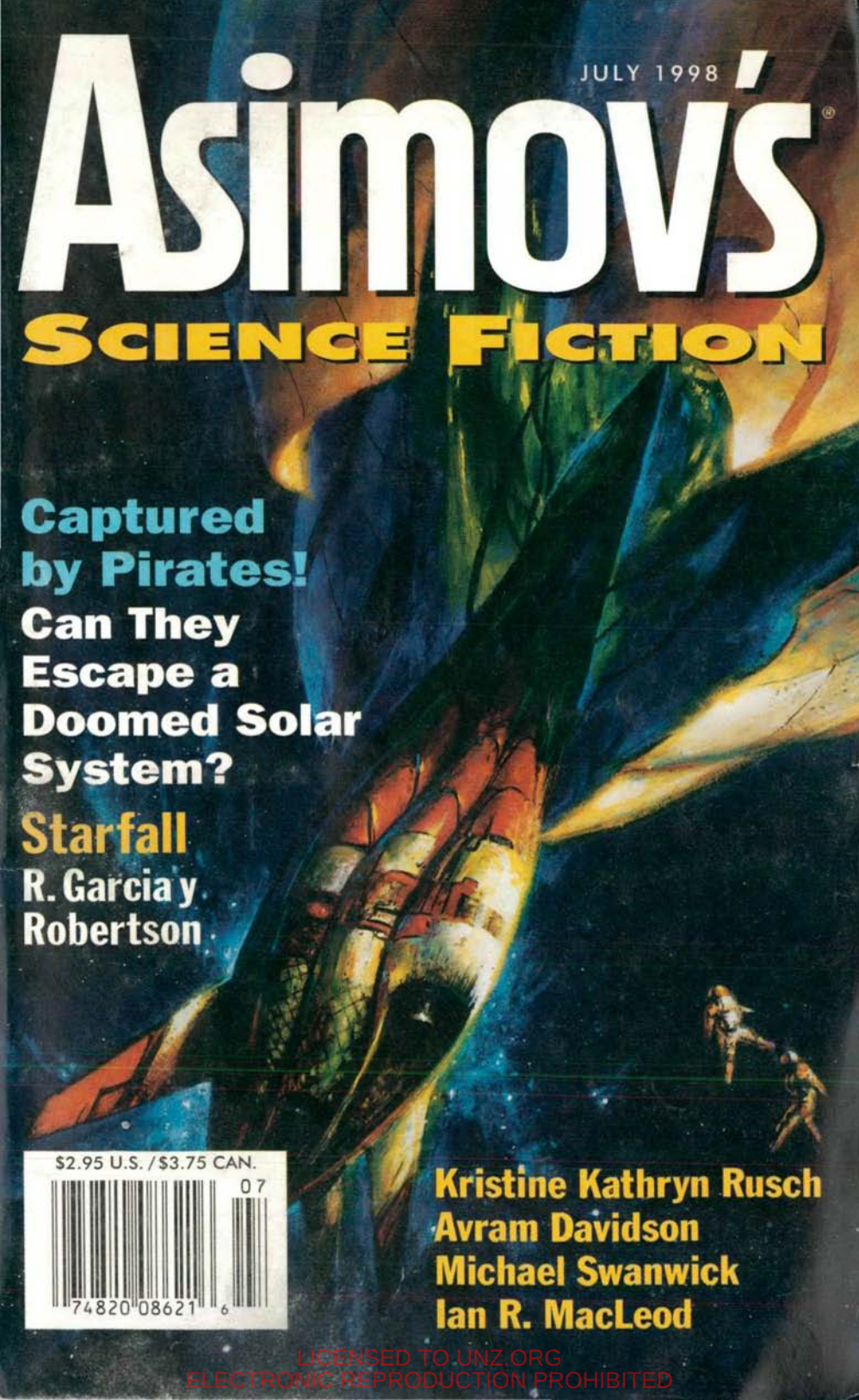

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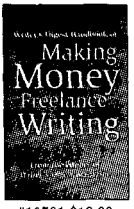

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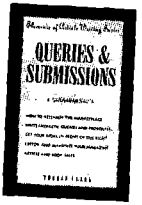

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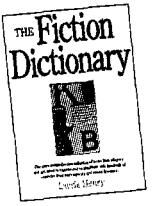

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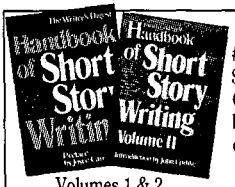

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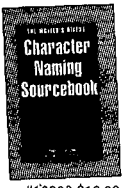

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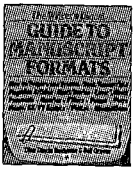

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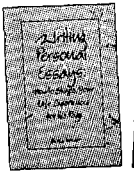

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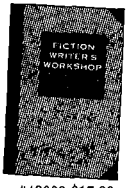

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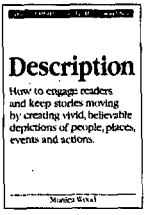
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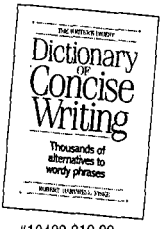

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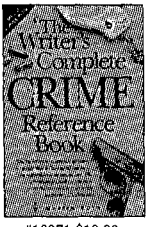

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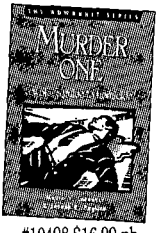

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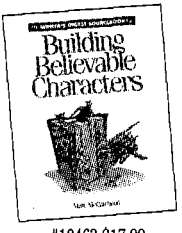

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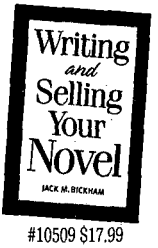

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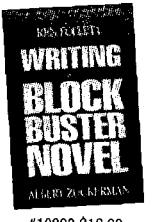

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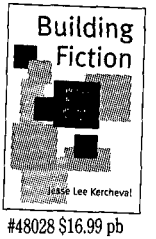

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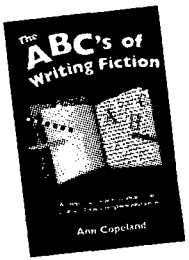

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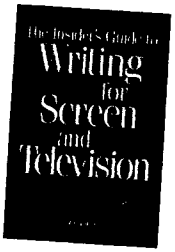

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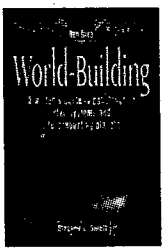

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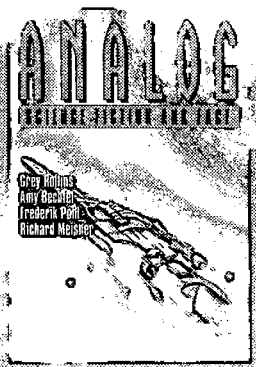

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

MUTANT SEAWEED ENGULFS THE MEDITERRANEAN

Last month I found myself musing over the startling plenitude of gaudy science-fictional news items that bespeckled our media in the summer of 1997—the landing on Mars, the mishaps of the Mir space station, the fuss over the Roswell UFO anniversary, and on and on and on. The next weirdity in the skein came just a little too late to add to my siege of *fin-de-siecle* befuddlement, but it's a corker.

It could be straight out of Hollywood, too. Mutant life-form invades the Mediterranean! Secretes toxic chemicals! All undersea plant life in its path is smothered! No way to halt its inexorable advance! Attempts at solving the problem only make it worse! Food chain shattered! Famous seafood restaurants of the Riviera contemplate converting to meat-based menus!

Sinister mutant seaweed, yes. I kid you not.

The story behind this latest of Earth's ecological plagues starts in Stuttgart, Germany, about a quarter of a century ago. The Wilhelmina Zoo of that city has a tropical aquarium, for which it imported supplies of a pretty little Pacific seaweed known as *Caulerpa taxifolia.* The Stuttgart aquarium people felt that this dainty item, which has delicate bright green fronds, would provide a pleasantly luxurious backdrop for their angel fish and kissing gouramis and such.

Yes, it would. But in the manner of mad scientists everywhere, they began to tinker with cute little *Caulerpa taxifolia* and before long they produced a diabolical botanical Frankenstein, which they were thoughtful enough to share with their professional colleagues all over Europe. And, wouldn't you know it, eventually the damned thing got loose in the sea.

No one at the Wilhelmina Aquarium is quite sure how, let alone why, they achieved their remarkable result. Apparently the chemicals in the aquarium water provided a richer fare than the cute little algae were accustomed to in their native habitat, and they thrived spectacularly on their new diet. That had something to do with it. Aquarium records indicate that unnatural selection was involved, too—the Stuttgart marine biologists chose their sturdiest and most vigorous *Caulerpa* specimens for their breeding experiments. These they subjected to doses of ultraviolet light, which may have induced mutation. The aquarium isn't quite sure why this was done. There seems to be a possibility, too, of hybridization with another (undetermined) seaweed species.

However the trick was managed, the Stuttgart folks created a Godzilla seaweed. Not only did it grow six times the size of the ancestral *Caulerpa,* but it grew a lot faster, too, swiftly forming huge clumps where the original item had produced only tiny clusters. And it was physically tough, capable of flourishing in water as cold as 50 degrees, whereas its predecessor required the 70-degree minimum of tropical waters.

After a couple of years the Wilhelmina Aquarium passed samples of their robust new seaweed along to a couple of French aquariums, one in

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Paris and one in Nancy. The Nancy people sent some of theirs on to the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco, one of the world's greatest aquariums, spectacularly located on a cliffside in Monte Carlo overlooking the Mediterranean. And the Monaco folks apparently flushed some mutant *Caulerpa* into that splendid sea while cleaning their tanks one day. They didn't mean to do it, of course. They are *sane* scientists, as they will tell you themselves. (The ones in Hollywood monster movies always say the same thing.)

A small colony of the mutant alga showed up in Mediterranean waters right below the home of the Oceanographic Institute in 1984. It must have liked the conditions it encountered down there, because it began quickly to spread. And spread. And spread.

At the moment, the Stuttgart form of *Caulerpa taxifolia* covers some eight thousand acres of the Mediterranean floor, and you can bet that that figure will be obsolete by the time you get to read this, six months or so after I write it, because its spread has increased at a rate of better than 300 percent a year over the past three years. The stuff has been spotted all along the French Riviera and as far west as the island of Majorca, off the coast of Spain. It's going the other way too, showing up in Italian waters and even along the shores of Croatia. Wherever it goes, it crowds out the plants and animals that happen already to live there. The whole eco-system changes. Everything but *Caulerpa* vanishes.

"It's like a tumor that can't be stopped and that chokes everything around it," says the French biologist Alexandre Meinesz, who is currently studying the *Caulerpa* menace in the hope of finding some way to bring it under control. "What we have here is a sort of monster."

Indeed we do. It has no difficulty

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overpowering and displacing the native algae that serve as growing-grounds for the young of all those interesting fish and crustaceans that form such an important part of the Mediterranean-area cuisine. Where all sorts of friendly sea-plants once lived, there now are vast meadows of the distinctly unfriendly *Caulerpa.*

The newcomer does not meet the digestive needs of Mediterranean fauna at all. On the contrary: it gives off some sort of toxic secretion that renders it inedible to most sea creatures. An experiment conducted by Jean-François Boudouresque, professor of marine biology at the University of Marseilles, demonstrated that sea urchins in the vicinity of Marseilles would rather nibble on pieces of plastic, or even their own waste products, than touch *Caulerpa.* But plastic offers the urchins no nutrition, and so before long they move along to kinder pastures. The crabs and shrimps and sea-snails, the anemones and starfishes and lobsters, also migrate to other regions in search of better fare. And so do the fishes that feed on these creatures.

All up and down the food chain, therefore, the Mediterranean is turning to a desert wherever the new seaweed has taken over. And its range seems to be limitless. "It adapts to anything—rocks, sand, mud," the biologist Alexandre Meinesz tells us. "It thrives equally well in agitated currents and quiet inlets and in polluted and pristine waters."

What to do, what to do?

Rip it out, of course. The French and Spanish navies have sent divers down to remove the stuff by hand or to gobble it up with suction pumps. Doesn't work. Somehow fragments of the uprooted weed stay behind and start new colonies all over the place. Off the French town of Port Saint-Cyprien, divers wiped out all the *Caulerpa* that could be found in 1991, but within two years there was a new stand of it there, twenty times the size of the one that supposedly had been eradicated. Three years later, Port Saint-Cyprien tried again, dumping ten tons of salt on one stretch of the weed, which was not in itself a particularly environment-friendly act—but 75 percent of the stand survived even that.

Now a plan is afoot to attack the all-conquering seaweed with a species of snail imported from the Caribbean, where it grazes happily on the native *Caulerpa* variety. Presumably it will do the same with the mutant Mediterranean kind, although no other creature will touch it. The French government, uneasy about introducing a new predator into the already fragile Mediterranean ecology, is studying the plan, with no decision yet reached, despite Dr. Meinertz's insistence that the snail won't attack anything but *Caulerpa.* In any case, he says, it is incapable of surviving the cool Mediterranean winters, so there is no chance of its becoming established there with possible harmful results after it has done its holy work on the designated enemy. Meanwhile, though, the snails remain in the laboratory in Nice where they are being bred, and the inexorable advance of the dread seaweed continues, hour by hour.

There is the possibility, of course, that some kind of ecological equilibrium will be reached long before *Caulerpa* chokes the whole Mediterranean. That's what happened along Australia's Great Barrier Reef, which in the 1970s was threatened with destruction as a result of a population explosion among the crown-of-thorns starfish, a voracious gobbler that seemed likely to devour the entire reef. But just when the reef's doom looked inevitable, natural cycles reasserted themselves, the crown-of-thorns population curve

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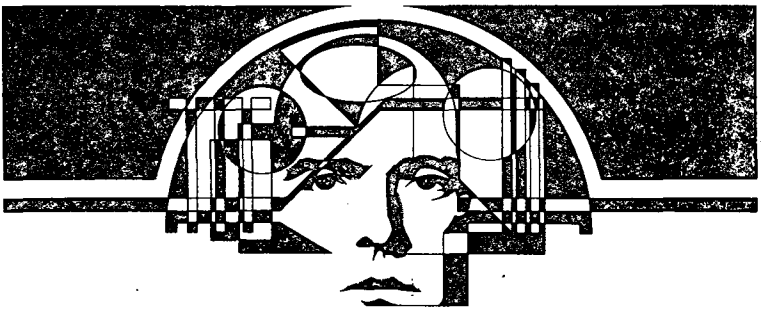
turned downward, and as reef conditions reverted to normal the beleaguered coral began to regenerate. The starfish threat now seems to have abated entirely.

Possibly something similar will happen in this case, too. What's needed is a reliable and indefatigable local enemy to keep the mutant alga in check. So far none is in sight, unless you count those Caribbean snails, whose value here is still open to doubt. But perhaps there's some particularly ugly species of grouper or sea bass living out at the eastern end of the Mediterranean—in the vicinity of Cyprus or Lebanon, say—that would take great joy in scarfing down *Caulerpa taxifolia* by the ton, if only it knew how tasty it is. Eventually word will spread through the Mediterranean underwater grapevine that there's a nifty new weed growing all over the place down at the western end of the sea, and salvation for the restaurateurs of Nice and Cannes and Marseilles will come swimming westward, eyes wide open and jaws agape. One can only hope. ●



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Sheila Williams

The 1998 ISAAC ASIMOV AWARD

Isaac Asimov Award finalists and judges: Marri Champie, Rick Wilber, Emily Thornbury, William Stacey Cochran, and Sheila Williams

Photo credit: Beth Gwinn

Emily Thornbury, an English major at Harvard University, was the 1998 winner of the Isaac Asimov Award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy Short Story Writing. The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, which co-sponsors the award with *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, flew the author to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, in March for an all-expense-paid weekend at the annual Conference on the Fantastic.

Emily's favorite SF authors include Ray Bradbury and Arthur C. Clarke, and she's read Ben Bova's *How to Write Science Fiction* "at least ten times." At the conference,

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she had the chance to meet Mr. Bova, along with authors such as Peter Straub, Lois McMaster Bujold, John Kessel, Suzy McKee Charnas, Kathleen Ann Goonan, Brian Aldiss, and Joe Haldeman. Like last year's winner, she presented her award-winning story, "Worm Holes," at a reading with Daniel Keyes—the renowned author of "Flowers for Algernon." Emily also has a keen interest in astrophysics, and she had previously won an Alamagordo Space Center Essay Contest on space colonization.

The Asimov Award winner, and the award's other finalists, were chosen by IAFA Award Administrator Rick Wilber, Gardner Dozois, and myself. At IAFA's award banquet on Saturday, March 22, Rick, Emily, and I were joined by Marri Champie, our second runner-up, and William Stacey Cochran, one of our honorable mentions. After dinner, I presented Emily with an award certificate and a check for $500 from the magazine. Marri, a student at Boise State University, also received a certificate and a one-year subscription to *Asimov's* for her story, "Old Bones."

Having traveled all the way from Idaho, Marri was delighted to spend a weekend soaking up the sun with fellow authors, finalists, and academics. Stacey, a student at East Carolina University, received a certificate for his story, "Within the Parallax." During the conference, he took some time off to make a pilgrimage to the home of Ernest Hemingway on the Florida Keys.

The first runner-up for this year's award was Michael Channing of the University of North Carolina at Asheville. Mr. Channing received a two-year subscription to *Asimov's* for his tale "Dryad." Third runner-up went to Adam Perin of the University of Cincinnati for "Silent Exemplar." Like Marri, he is entitled to a one-year subscription to *Asimov's*. A. Kaay Miller of the University of Texas at El Paso received an honorable mention for "Like Mad Cassandra."

Asimov's is proud to support these academic awards with IAFA. The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts is a worldwide network of scholars, educators, writers, artists, filmmakers, critics, editors, publishers, and performers who share an interest in studying and celebrating the fantastic in all artforms, disciplines, and media. The award is also supported by the School of Mass Communications at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida.

We are now actively looking for next year's winner. The deadline for submissions to the contest is December 15, 1998. All full-time undergraduate students at any accredited university or college are eligible. Stories must be in English, and should run from 1,000 to 10,000 words. No submission can be returned and all stories must be previously unpublished and unsold. There is no limit to the number of submissions from each writer. Each submission must include the writer's name, address, phone number, and college or university on the cover sheet, but please remove your name from the manuscript.

Before entering the contest, please contact Award Administrator Rick Wilber for more information, rules, and manuscript guidelines. Rick can be reached care of:

Asimov Award
School of Mass Communications
University of South Florida
Tampa, FL 33620

Next year's winner will be announced at the 1999 Conference on the Fantastic, in the pages of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, and on our website. ○

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LETTERS

Greetings to all,

I just wanted to commend *Asimov's* editing staff for selecting Mr. Williams's fascinating novelette "Lethe" for the concluding story in the September 1997 issue. To paraphrase John W. Campbell, a good science fiction writer can make the reader see the inside of an alien's mind and able to understand the creature. Mr. Williams has succeeded in doing that for me. His human beings live so far in the future that, to me, they have become alien, yet I was able to understand them perfectly well.

I had never heard of Walter Jon Williams before, but hope to see his work in future issues.

Philip J. Shirk
Houston, TX

Dear Gardner Dozois,

Short fiction has always been the center of the SF field and may be today more than ever. While much of the field has deteriorated into corporate role-playing universes and product tie-ins, *Asimov's* and a handful of other magazines continue to provide science fiction with a core of legitimacy. I look to your magazine for thoughtful, well-crafted science fiction and have been doing so for more than fifteen years. Recently, I enjoyed Allen Steele's ". . . Where Angels Fear to Tread"; Robert Reed's "Mind's Eye"; Gregory Feeley's "On the Ice Islands"; Walter Jon Williams's "Lethe"; and John C. Wright's "Guest Law." Favorites from the past include Stephen Baxter's "The Logic Pool" and "Zemlya"; Tony Daniel's "A Dry, Quiet War" and "The Robot's Twilight Companion"; Greg Egan's "Luminous"; Alexander Jablokov's "A Deeper Sea" and "The Place of No Shadows"; Stephen Kraus's "Bright River"; Geoffrey A. Landis's "A Walk in the Sun" and "Ripples in the Dirac Sea"; Daniel Marcus's "Ex Vitro"; and Tom Purdom's "Cider." Each of these stories and their writers are responsible in their own way, as is *Asimov's* itself, for making me a writer.

Michael Bateman
Fraser, CO

Dear *Asimov's*,

I just read the December 1997 issue—what a wonderful treat!—a Janet Kagan and a Connie Willis in the same issue—I think I've died and gone to heaven! Please implore Ms. Kagan and Ms. Willis to keep writing for the magazine!

Emily Oaks
Sterling, NY

Dear Ms. Kagan:

I thoroughly enjoyed your story "Standing in the Spirit." I am a fan of Mr. Dickens as well as yourself, and as a child I read *A Christmas Carol* every Christmas season. I am also an incurable romantic, so the story appealed to me on several levels. I had a friend, who went by the name Var (short for Lochinvar), who felt much the same about Sir Walter Scott as Eben did about Charles Dickens, so it appealed to me on that level also.

However, I have read somewhere that Mr. Dickens did not write his stories with a pen, but used a pencil instead. I believe that this may have been in an editorial about people who refused to use computers and

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word processors, preferring older methods, and may have been written by Dr. Asimov.

David G. Hills
Pittsburgh, PA

Dear Gardner,

Just a note to let you know how much I've been enjoying Paul Di Filippo's book column. I don't think I've ever seen C.M. Kornbluth and Theodore Sturgeon mentioned in the same review with Thomas Pynchon and Kathy Acker, but it's about time.

I admire a worldview that encompasses traditional, contemporary, and borderline SF. If only for recommending wildly satiric *Civilwarland in Bad Decline* by George Saunders, Mr. Di Filippo deserves my thanks.

His throwaway observations are also delightful: "But as we all know, love of SF is a virus impossible to eradicate utterly from the body, and it often flares up when least expected" (his Dec. '97 column). How true, how true . . .

Tom Marcinko
from the Internet

Hello,

I hope I hope I hope I hope Robert Reed has more Families-that-blew-the-galactic-core stories coming. He's left a hell of a dangling plotline hangin'. Also, more of R. Neube's King Richard stories (January 1998), that's a future I'd like to see fleshed out. Left-over royalty, something we may always have with us . . .

Thornton Kimes
San Francisco, CA

Dear *Asimov's*:

Robert Silverberg's article "To Clone or Not to Clone" (February 1998) had some interesting points, but what I found most interesting about it was his unquestioned dichotomy between "ghastly Frankensteinian motives" and "sheer scientific curiosity." Curiosity strikes me as a pretty Frankensteinian motive to do anything to another human being. Imagine a couple having a child because they want to see if they are fertile.

His chief argument for cloning, that it is going to happen, also strikes me as feeble, even though I agree that it probably will. A great many things are impossible to prevent: all past murders, for instance. That doesn't make them right.

Cloning humans is always wrong because it treats human beings like objects, things to be manufactured. No one has a right to another human being, and that no one has a right to manufacture a human being is an obvious deduction from that.

Mary Catelli
Berlin, CT

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

You're absolutely right, it is hysteria. Considering the fact that per news reports I heard, the lamb Dolly was not a one-shot success, but was one success in over two hundred trials, I would hardly say that this is an established and fool-proof technique. And that's not even a trial on a human clone. I guess they couldn't really claim a success on such a clone until it had reached a few years of age and demonstrated normal human abilities, such as speech and thought. Clinton and his ilk are riding on the right-wing revivalist movement to keep themselves in power. Personally, I think that a ban such as he announced is more likely to set some contrarian (if there is such a word) researcher saying, "Oh yeah? Who are you to tell me what I can and can't research?" Such politicians are pious hypocrites at best. Let's hope the hysteria is contained and we don't end up with labs being burned and such idiocies.

Daniel Liard
Vancouver, BC
Canada

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Mr. Silverberg,

I'm writing in response to your editorial on cloning that I read in the February 1998 issue of *Asimov's Science Fiction.*

I very much agree with you that the existence of small children who are genetically identical to some adult shouldn't be a hard thing for our society to cope with. Society hasn't seemed to have had very much trouble coping with children who are genetically identical to each other in the past. I hope, however, that very careful consideration will always be given to situations in which new children will be coming into the world at the behest of organizations other than families. I can imagine some people thinking that artificial forms of conception give license for situations in which organizations are undertaking the job of parenthood with agendas other than the child's own best interest, and I strongly disagree. Also, I have a feeling that if conceiving a clone becomes as inexpensive as conception involving freezing ova is now, then among clone parents the people with large egos will be outnumbered by people with regrets about their own lives who feel capable of helping someone very like them to have the opportunity to live a better one. You've probably thought these things already at one time or another, so now you know you've stimulated me to think them as well.

John Banister
from the Internet

Dear Editors:

I am a very new subscriber to *Asimov's.* So far I am pleased with it, as I knew I would be. I have especially enjoyed Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column. Regarding his article about cloning: The first human to be cloned will be sought after by fanatics, and even if they don't kill the child, he or she would never have any kind of normal life due to the constant security measures that would have to be taken. If human cloning is done in cases of single parents wanting children and so forth, the clones will become a persecuted underclass just as other minority groups have been in the past and present. The only way to minimize these effects is to educate the public on what cloning is really all about, to the point of common knowledge, before any human cloning ever takes place.

Michael Davisson
St. Ann, MO

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

I just finished your Reflections column "To Clone or Not to Clone" and was moved to make a few comments. To address people who are afraid of clones running around, one simply needs to point out that clones *are* running around now. Every pair of identical twins born is not only a naturally occurring clone, one of the other, but in most circumstances will come as close to being raised in an identical environment as is conceivably possible. The result? Two very similar, but in the end, distinct and different human beings. The idea that some rich tycoon could spend his money to create a clone that would in essence duplicate himself (or herself—don't want to be sexist) is silly. A clone created under those circumstances starts with an even greater handicap (if identity is the goal) in that the original environment that created the person being cloned no longer exists. Our personalities are so sensitive to the effects of environment and experience that cloning at the level of current technology is simply another way to reproduce.

An additional limitation on the current cloning process is the effect of mitochondrial inheritance. Existing clone techniques merely dupli-

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cate the genetic material from the nucleus of the animal to be cloned. To create true genetic identity, one would have to duplicate the mitochondrial DNA as well. The latter can have a greater impact on "identity" than many might assume, given that disorders of mitochondrial DNA can create deficiencies of intelligence, weakness, seizures, blindness and affect many other systems as well.

At the same time, I must take issue with your statement, "But I'm not sure that there's any point to the cloning of humans, other than whatever scientific knowledge might accrue from bringing the stunt off." Larry Niven anticipated the possibilities with his description of "organ banks." We already live in an age where the Chinese military may be executing prisoners and selling their organs for transplantation. With the perfection of human cloning, illicit labs could theoretically create duplicates of the rich to keep in storage for the harvesting of replacement organs when needed. These are unfortunately the perfect donor organs, because of their genetic identity to the recipient. At the same time, pursuit of this scientific knowledge might eventually allow for the creation of individual organs alone, something that is morally acceptable to most people and would end the current donor organ shortage.

I agree with the thought that no legislation will prevent this research from occurring. To attempt to prevent it is counterproductive—like banning the study of physics because someone might create a nuclear weapon. The only thing that such legislation will accomplish is making sure the US will lag behind whatever nations proceed with such research.

In every age of man, there has been danger from new technology. We already have the "science" to exterminate every living thing on the earth's surface—and have not done so. What keeps us alive is the constant vigorous moral debate about the use of such technology. With cloning, as with every other scientific development, we need to keep talking.

Jeremy D. Slater, M.D.
Springfield, MO

Gardner and Sheila,

Overall, I think the February 1998 issue may be the strongest in a long time—especially the Egan, Williams and Swanwick pieces. However, Janet Kagan's "The Stubbornest Broad on Earth" very well may be The Stupidest Story You've Ever Published. I'm surprised by all three of you.

Happy new year to all.

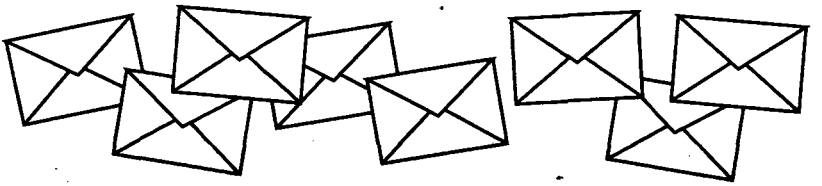
Rick Hauptmann
from the Internet

Dear Editor,

I started Michael Swanwick's "The Very Pulse of the Machine," and almost immediately I decided this was a remake of Kip and Peewee and the ghostly voice of Oscar fleeing across Heinlein's Moon in *Have Spacesuit—Will Travel.* Then came the ambush; the story twisted, and it twisted again.

Great piece of work.

David Lowe
from the Internet



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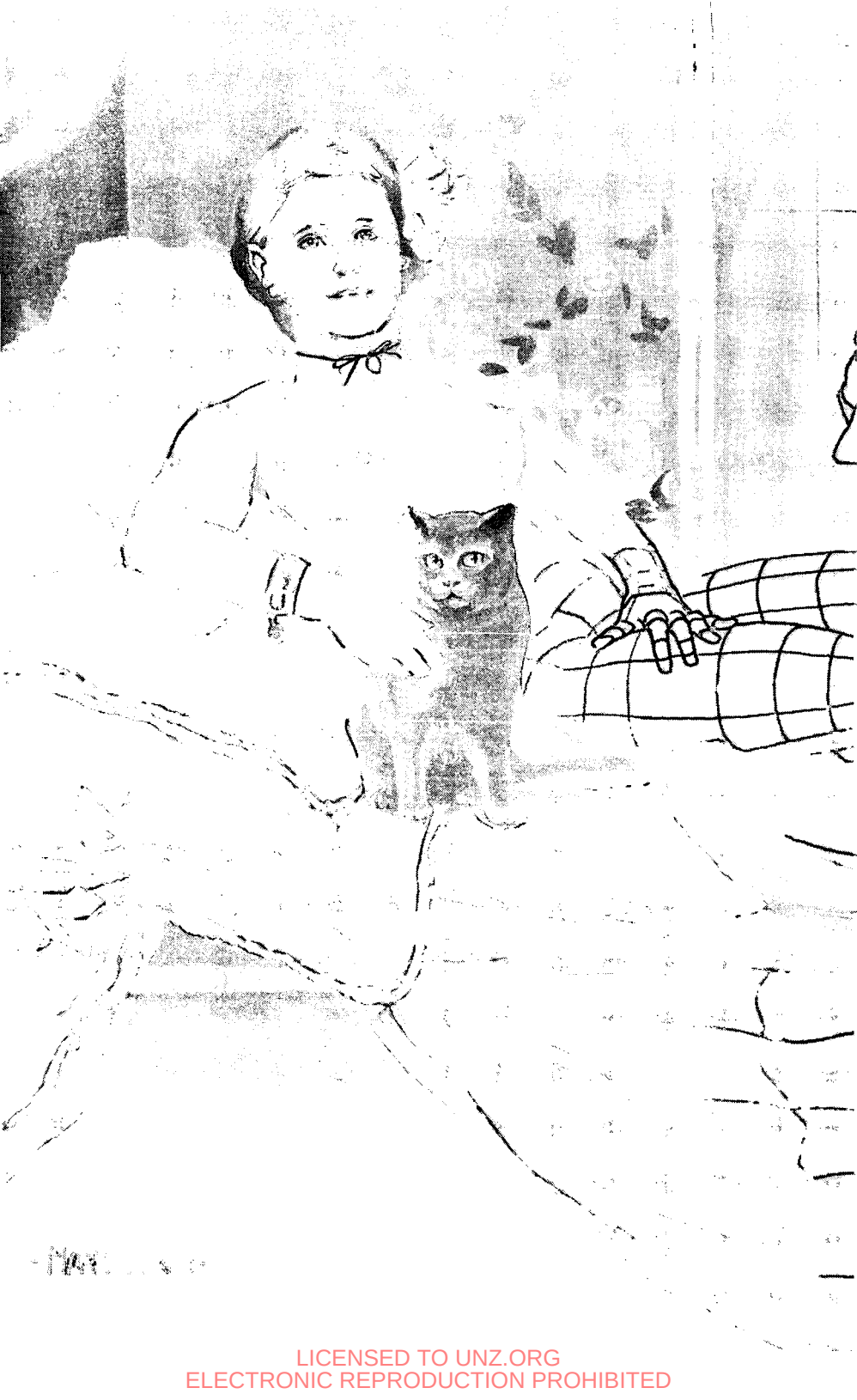

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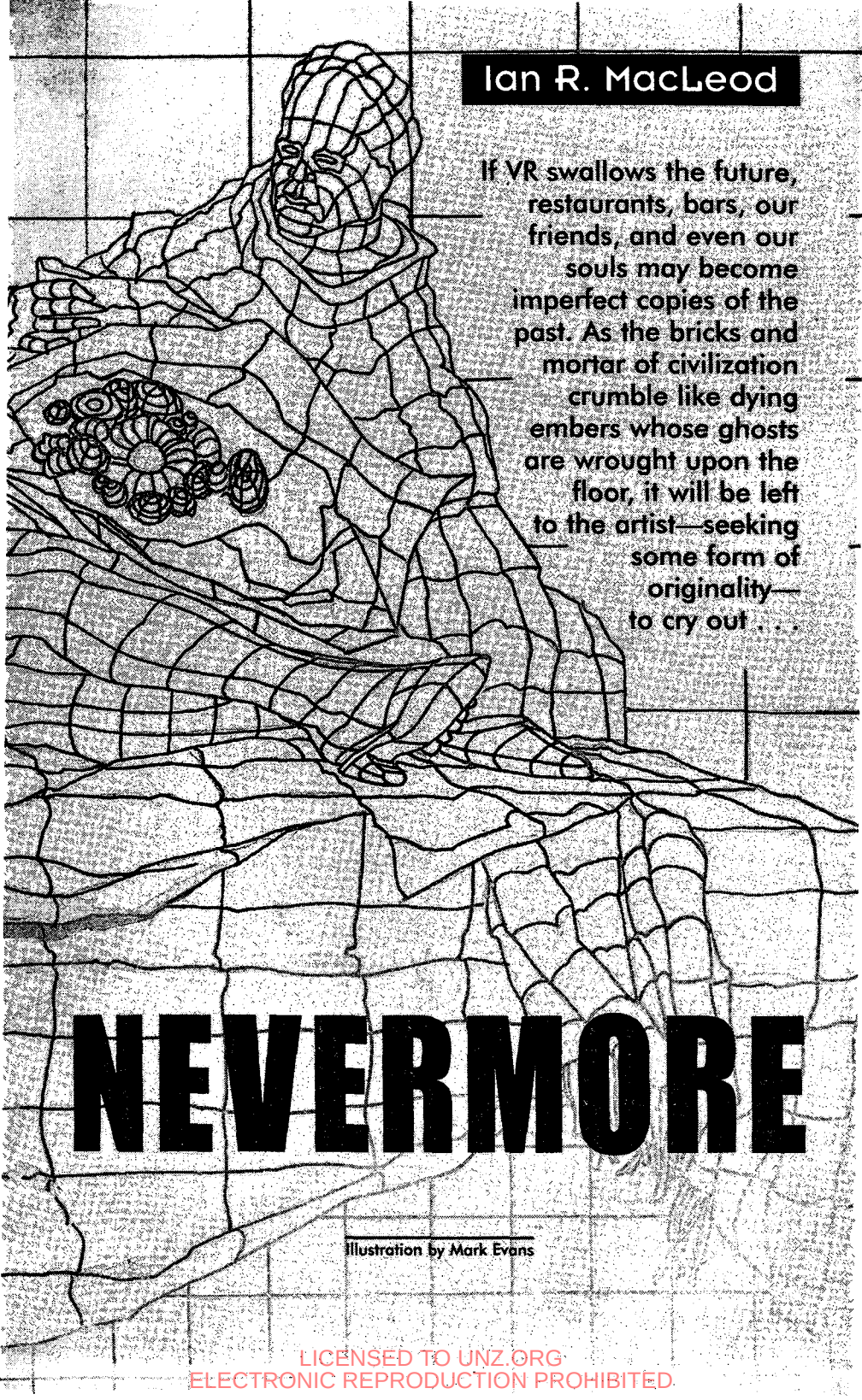

Ian R. MacLeod

If VR swallows the future, restaurants, bars, our friends, and even our souls may become imperfect copies of the past. As the bricks and mortar of civilization crumble like dying embers whose ghosts are wrought upon the floor, it will be left to the artist—seeking some form of originality—to cry out . . .

NEVERMORE

Illustration by Mark Evans

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Now that he couldn't afford to buy enough reality, Gustav had no option but to paint what he saw in his dreams. With no sketchpad to bring back, no palette or cursor, his head rolling up from the pillow and his mouth dry and his jaw aching from the booze he'd drunk the evening before—which was the cheapest means he'd yet found of getting to sleep—he was left with just that one chance, and a few trailing wisps of something that might once have been beautiful before he had to face the void of the day.

It hadn't started like this, but he could see by now that this was how it had probably ended. Representational art had had its heyday, and for a while he'd been feted like the bright new talent he'd once been sure he was. And big lumpy actuality that you could smell and taste and get under your fingernails would probably come back into style again—long after it had ceased to matter to him.

So that was it. Load upon load of self pity falling down upon him this morning from the damp-stained ceiling. What *had* he been dreaming? Something—surely something. Otherwise being here and being Gustav wouldn't come as this big a jolt. He should've got more used to it than this by now. . . . Gustav scratched himself, and discovered that he also had an erection, which was another sign—hadn't he read once, somewhere?—that you'd been dreaming dreams of the old-fashioned kind, unsimulated, unaided. A sign, anyway, of a kind of biological optimism. The hope that there might just be a hope.

Arthritic, Cro-Magnon, he wandered out from his bed. Knobbled legs, knobbled veins, knobbled toes. He still missed the habit of fiddling with the controls of his window in the pock-marked far wall, changing the perspectives and the light in the dim hope that he might stumble across something better. The sun and the moon were blazing down over Paris from their respective quadrants, pouring like mercury through the nanosmog. He pressed his hand to the glass, feeling the watery wheeze of the crack that now snaked across it. Five stories up in these scrawny empty tenements, and a long, long way down. He laid his forehead against its coolness as the sour thought that he might try to paint this scene speeded through him. He'd finished at least twenty paintings of foreal Paris; all reality engines and cabled ruins in grey, black, and white. Probably done, oh, at least several hundred studies in inkwash, pencil, charcoal. No one would ever buy them, and for once they were right. The things were passionless, ugly—he pitied the potentially lovely canvases he'd ruined to make them. He pulled back from the window and looked down at himself. His erection had faded from sight beneath his belly.

Gustav shuffled through food wrappers and scrunched-up bits of cartridge paper. Leaning drifts of canvas frames turned their backs from him toward the walls, whispering on breaths of turpentine of things that might once have been. But that was okay, because he didn't have any paint right now. Maybe later, he'd get the daft feeling that, today, something might work out, and he'd sell himself for a few credits in some stupid trick or other—what had it been last time; painting roses red dressed as a playing card?—and the supply ducts would bear him a few precious tubes of oils. And a few hours after that he'd be—but what was that noise?

A thin white droning like a plastic insect. In fact, it had been there all along—had probably woken him at this ridiculous hour—but had seemed so much a part of everything else that he hadn't noticed. Gustav looked around, tilting his head until his better ear located the source. He slid a sticky avalanche of canvas board and cotton paper off an old chair, and burrowed in

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the cushions until his hand closed on a telephone. He'd only kept the thing because it was so cheap that the phone company hadn't bothered to disconnect the line when he'd stopped paying. That was, if the telephone company still existed. The telephone was chipped from the time he'd thrown it across the room after his last conversation with his agent. But he touched the activate pad anyway, not expecting anything more than a blip in the system, white machine noise.

"Gustav, you're still *there*, are you?"

He stared at the mouthpiece. It was his dead ex-wife Elanore's voice.

"What do you want?"

"Don't be like that, Gus. Well, *I* won't be anyway. Time's passed, you know, things have changed."

"Sure, and you're going to tell me next that you—"

"—Yes, would like to meet up. We're arranging this party. I ran into Marcel in Venice—he's currently Doge there, you know—and we got talking about old times and all the old gang. And so we decided we were due for a reunion. You've been one of the hardest ones to find, Gus. And then I remembered that old tenement . . . "

"Like you say, I'm still here."

"Still painting?"

"Of *course* I'm still painting! It's what I do."

"That's great. Well—sorry to give you so little time, but the whole thing's fixed for this evening. You won't *believe* what everyone's up to now! But then, I suppose you've seen Francine across the sky."

"Look, I'm not sure that I—"

"—And we're going for Paris, 1890. Should be right up your street. I've splashed out on all-senses. And the food and the drink'll be foreal. So you'll come, won't you? The past is the past, and I've honestly forgotten about much of it since I passed on. Put it into context, anyway. I really don't bear a grudge. So you *will* come? Remember how it was, Gus? Just smile for me the way you used to. And remember . . . "

Of course he remembered. But he still didn't know what the hell to expect that evening as he waited—too early, despite the fact that he'd done his best to be pointedly late—in the virtual glow of a pavement café off the Rue St-Jacques beneath a sky fuzzy with Van Gogh stars.

Searching the daubed figures strolling along the cobbles, Gustav spotted Elanore coming long before she saw him. He raised a hand, and she came over, sitting down on a wobbly chair at the uneven swirl of the table. Doing his best to maintain a grumpy pose, Gustav called the waiter for wine, and raised his glass to her with trembling fingers. He swallowed it all down. Just as she'd promised, the stuff was foreal.

Elanore smiled at him. And Elanore looked beautiful. Elanore was dressed for the era in a long dress of pure ultramarine. Her red hair was bunched up beneath a narrow-brimmed hat adorned with flowers.

"It's about now," she said, "that you tell me I haven't changed."

"And you tell me that I *have*."

She nodded. "But it's true. Although you haven't changed *that* much, Gus. You've aged, but you're still one of the most . . . solid people I know."

Elanore offered him a Disc Bleu. He took it, although he hadn't smoked in years and she'd always complained that the things were bad for him when she was alive. Elanore's skin felt cool and dry in the moment that their hands

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touched, and the taste of the smoke as it shimmered amid the brush strokes was just as it had always been. Music drifted out from the blaze of the bar where dark figures writhed as if in flames. Any moment now, he knew, she'd try to say something vaguely conciliatory, and she'd interrupt as he attempted to do the same.

He gestured around at the daubs and smears of the other empty tables. He said, "I thought I was going to be late. . . ." The underside of the canopy that stretched across the pavement blazed. How poor old Vincent had loved his cadmiums and chromes! And never sold one single fucking painting in his entire life.

"What—what I told you was true," Elanore said, stumbling slightly over these little words, sounding almost un-Elanore-like for a moment; nearly uneasy. "I mean, about Marcel in Venice and Francine across the sky. And, yes, we *did* talk about a reunion. But you know how these things are. Time's precious, and, at the end of the day it's been so long that these things really do take a lot of nerve. So it didn't come off. It was just a few promises that no one really imagined they'd keep. But I thought—well, I thought that it would be nice to see *you* anyway. At least one more time."

"So all of this is just for me. *Jesus,* Elanore, I knew you were rich, but . . . "

"Don't be like that, Gustav. I'm not trying to impress you or depress you or whatever. It was just the way it came out."

He poured more of the wine, wondering as he did so exactly what trick it was that allowed them to share it.

"So, you're still painting?"

"Yep."

"I haven't seen much of your work about."

"I do it for private clients," Gustav said. "Mostly."

He glared at Elanore, daring her to challenge his statement. Of course, if he really *was* painting and selling, he'd have some credit. And if he had *credit,* he wouldn't be living in that dreadful tenement she'd tracked him down to. He'd have paid for all the necessary treatments to stop himself becoming the frail old man he so nearly was. *I can help, you know,* Gustav could hear Elanore saying, because he'd heard her say it so many times before. *I don't need all this wealth. So let me give you just a little help. Give me that chance. . . .* But what she actually *said* was even worse.

"Are you recording yourself, Gus?" Elanore asked. "Do you have a librarian?"

Now, he thought, now is the time to walk out. Pull this whole thing down and go back into the street—the foreal street. And forget.

"Did you know," he said instead, "that the word reality once actually *meant* foreal—not the projections and the simulations, but proper actuality. But then along came *virtual* reality, and of course, when the *next* generation of products was developed, the illusion was so much better that you could walk right into it instead of having to put on goggles and a suit. So they had to think of an improved phrase, a super-word for the purposes of marketing. And someone must have said, *Why don't we just call it reality?*"

"You don't have to be hurtful, Gus. There's no rule written down that says we can't get on."

"I thought that that was exactly the problem. It's in my head, and it was probably there in yours before you died. Now it's . . . " He'd have said more. But he was suddenly, stupidly, near to tears.

"What exactly *are* you doing these days, Gus?" she asked as he cleared his

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throat and pretended it was the wine that he'd choked on. "What are you painting at the moment?"

"I'm working on a series," he was surprised to hear himself saying. "It's a sort of a journey-piece. A sequence of paintings which begin here in Paris and then . . ." He swallowed. ". . . bright, dark colors . . ." A nerve began to leap beside his eye. Something seemed to touch him, but was too faint to be heard or felt or seen.

"Sounds good, Gus," Elanore said, leaning toward him across the table. And Elanore smelled of Elanore, the way she always did. Her pale skin was freckled from the sunlight of whatever warm and virtual place she was living. Across her cheeks and her upper lip, threaded gold, lay the down that he'd brushed so many times with his the tips of his fingers. "I can tell from that look in your eyes that you're into a really good phase. . . ."

After that, things went better. They shared a second bottle of *vin ordinaire*. They made a little mountain of the butts of her Disc Bleu in the ashtray. This ghost—she really *was* like Elanore. Gustav didn't even object to her taking his hand across the table. There was a kind of abandon in all of this—new ideas mixed with old memories. And he understood more clearly now what Van Gogh had meant about this café being a place where you could ruin yourself, or go mad or commit a crime.

The few other diners faded. The virtual waiters, their aprons a single assured grey-white stroke of the palette knife, started to tip the chairs against the tables. The aromas of the Left Bank's ever-unreliable sewers began to override those of cigarettes and people and horse dung and wine. At least, Gustav thought, *that* was still foreal. . . .

"I suppose quite a lot of the others have died by now," Gustav said. "All that facile gang you seem to so fondly remember."

"People still change, you know. Just because we've passed on, doesn't mean we can't *change*."

By now, he was in a mellow enough mood just to nod at that. And how have *you* changed, Elanore? he wondered. After so long, what flicker of the electrons made you decide to come to me now?

"You're obviously doing well."

"I am . . ." She nodded, as if the idea surprised her. "I mean, I didn't expect—"

"—And you look—"

"—And *you*, Gus, what I said about you being—"

"—That project of mine—"

"—I know, I—"

They stopped and gazed at each other. Then they both smiled, and the moment seemed to hold, warm and frozen, as if from a scene within a painting. It was almost . . .

"Well . . ." Elanore broke the illusion first as she began to fumble in the small sequined purse she had on her lap. Eventually, she produced a handkerchief and blew delicately on her nose. Gustav tried not to grind his teeth—although this was *exactly* the kind of affectation he detested about ghosts. He guessed, anyway, from the changed look on her face, that she knew what he was thinking. "I suppose that's it, then, isn't it, Gus? We've met—we've spent the evening together without arguing. Almost like old times."

"Nothing will ever be like old times."

"No . . ." Her eyes glinted, and he thought for a moment that she was going to become angry—goaded at last into something like the Elanore of old. But

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she just smiled. "Nothing ever will be like old times. That's the problem, isn't it? Nothing ever was, or ever will be . . . "

Elanore clipped her purse shut again. Elanore stood up. Gustav saw her hesitate as she considered bending down to kiss him farewell, then decided that he would just regard that as another affront, another slap in the face.

Elanore turned and walked away from Gustav, fading into the chiaroscuro swirls of lamplight and grey.

Elanore, as if Gustav needed reminding, had been alive when he'd first met her. In fact, he'd never known anyone who was *more* so. Of course, the age difference between them was always huge—she'd already been past a hundred by then, and he was barely forty—but they'd agreed on that first day that they met, and on many days after, that there was a corner in time around which the old eventually turned to rejoin the young.

In another age, and although she always laughingly denied it, Gustav always suspected that Elanore would have had her sagging breasts implanted with silicone, the wrinkles stretched back from her face, her heart replaced by a throbbing steel simulacrum. But she was lucky enough to exist at a time when effective anti-aging treatments were finally available. As a post-centarian, wise and rich and moderately, pleasantly, famous, Elanore was probably more fresh and beautiful than she'd been at any other era in her life. Gustav had met her at a party beside a Russian lake—guests wandering amid dunes of snow. Foreal had been a fashionable option then; although for Gustav, the grounds of this pillared ice-crystalled palace that Catherine the Great's Scottish favorite Charles Cameron had built seemed far too gorgeous to be entirely true. But it *was* true—foreal, actual, concrete, genuine, unvirtual—and such knowledge was what had driven him then. That, and the huge impossibility of ever really managing to convey any of it as a painter. That, and the absolute certainty that he would *try*.

Elanore had wandered up to him from the forest dusk dressed in seal furs. The shock of her beauty had been like all the rubbish he'd heard other artists talk about and thus so detested. And he'd been a stammering wreck, but somehow that hadn't mattered. There had been—and here again the words became stupid, meaningless—a dazed physicality between them from that first moment that was so intense it was spiritual.

Elanore told Gustav that she'd seen and admired the series of triptychs he'd just finished working on. They were painted directly onto slabs of wood, and depicted totemistic figures in dense blocks of color. The critics had generally damned them with faint praise—had talked of Cubism and Mondrian—and were somehow unable to recognize Gustav's obvious and grateful debt to Gauguin's Tahitian paintings. But Elanore had seen and understood those bright muddy colors. And, yes, she'd dabbled a little in painting herself—just enough to know that truly creative acts were probably beyond her . . .

Elanore wore her red hair short in those days. And there were freckles, then as always, scattered across the bridge of her nose. She showed the tips of her teeth when she smiled, and he was conscious of her lips and her tongue. He could smell, faint within the clouds of breath that entwined them, her womanly scent.

A small black cat threaded its way between them as they talked, then, barely breaking the crust of the snow, leapt up onto a bough of the nearest pine and crouched there, watching them with emerald eyes.

"That's Metzengerstein," Elanore said, her own even greener eyes flicker-

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ing across Gustav's face, but never ceasing to regard him. "He's my librarian."

When they made love later on in the agate pavilion's frozen glow, and as the smoke of their breath and their sweat clouded the winter twilight, all the disparate elements of Gustav's world finally seemed to join. He carved Elanore's breasts with his fingers and tongue, and painted her with her juices, and plunged into her sweet depths, and came, finally, finally, and quite deliciously, as her fingers slid around and he in turn was parted and entered by her.

Swimming back up from that, soaked with Elanore, exhausted, but his cock amazingly still half-stiff and rising, Gustav became conscious of the black cat that all this time had been threading its way between them. Its tail now curled against his thigh, corrugating his scrotum. Its claws gently kneaded his belly.

Elanore had laughed and picked Metzengerstein up, purring herself as she laid the creature between her breasts.

Gustav understood. Then or later, there was never any need for her to say more. After all, even Elanore couldn't live forever—and she needed a librarian with her to record her thoughts and actions if she was ever to pass on. For all its myriad complexities, the human brain had evolved to last a single lifetime; after that, the memories and impressions eventually began to overflow, the data became corrupted. Yes, Gustav understood. He even came to like the way Metzengerstein followed Elanore around like a witch's familiar, and, yes, its soft sharp cajolings as they made love.

Did they call them ghosts then? Gustav couldn't remember. It was a word, anyway—like spic, or nigger—that you never used in front of them. When he and Elanore were married, when Gustav loved and painted and loved and painted her, when she gave him her life and her spirit and his own career somehow began to take off as he finally mastered the trick of getting some of the passion he felt down onto the lovely, awkward canvas, he always knew that part of the intensity between them came from the age gap, the difference, the inescapable fact that Elanore would soon have to die.

It finally happened, he remembered, when he was leaving Gauguin's tropic dreams and nightmares behind and toying with a more straightforwardly Impressionist phase. Elanore was modeling for him nude as Manet's *Olympia*. As a concession to practicalities and to the urgency that then always possessed him when he was painting, the black maid-servant bearing the flowers in his lavish new studio on the Boulevard des Capucines was a projection, but the divan and all the hangings, the flowers, and the cat, of course—although by its programmed nature, Metzengerstein was incapable of looking quite as scared and scrawny as Manet's original—were all foreal.

"You know," Elanore said, not breaking pose, one hand toying with the hem of the shawl on which she was lying, the other laid negligently, possessively, without modesty, across her pubic triangle, "we really should re-invite Marcel over after all he's done for us lately."

"Marcel?" In honesty, Gustav was paying little attention to anything at that moment other than which shade to swirl into the boudoir darkness. He dabbed again onto his testing scrap. "Marcel's in San Francisco. We haven't seen him in months."

"Of course . . . silly me."

He finally glanced up again, what could have been moments or minutes later, suddenly aware that a cold silence had set in. Elanore, being Elanore,

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never forgot anything. Elanore was light and life. Now, all her *Olympia*-like poise was gone.

This wasn't like the decay and loss of function that affected the elderly in the days before recombinant drugs. Just like her heart and her limbs, Elanore's physical brain still functioned perfectly. But the effect was the same. Confusions and mistakes happened frequently after that, as if consciousness drained rapidly once the initial rent was made. For Elanore, with her exquisite dignity, her continued beauty, her companies and her investments and the contacts that she needed to maintain, the process of senility was particularly terrible. No one, least of all Gustav, argued against her decision to pass on.

Back where reality ended, it was past midnight and the moon was blazing down over the Left Bank's broken rooftops through the greyish brown nanosmog. And exactly where, Gustav wondered, glaring up at it through the still-humming gantries of the reality engine that had enclosed him and Elanore, is Francine across the sky? How much do you have to pay to get the right decoders in your optic nerves to see the stars entwined in some vast projection of her? How much of your life do you have to give away?

The mazy streets behind St-Michael were rotten and weed-grown in the bilious fog, the dulled moonlight. No one but Gustav seemed to live in the half-supported ruins of the Left Bank nowadays. It was just a place for posing in and being seen—although in that respect, Gustav reflected, things really hadn't changed. To get back to his tenement, he had to cross the Boulevard St-Germain through a stream of buzzing robot cars that, no matter how he dodged them, still managed to avoid him. In the busier streets beyond, the big reality engines were still glowing. In fact, it was said that you could now go from one side of Paris to the other without having to step out into foreal. Gustav, as ever, did his best to do the opposite, although he knew that, even without any credit, he would still be freely admitted to the many realities on offer in these generous, carefree days. He scowled at the shining planes of the powerfields that stretched between the gantries like bubbles. Faintly from inside, coming at him from beyond the humming of the transformers that tamed and organized the droplets of nanosmog into shapes you could feel, odors you could smell, chairs you could sit on, he could hear words and laughter, music, the clink of glasses. He could even just make out the shapes of the living as they postured and chatted. It was obvious from the way that they were grouped that the living were outnumbered by the dead these days. Outside, in the dim streets, he passed figures like tumbling decahedrons who bore their own fields with them as they moved between realities. They were probably unaware of him as they drifted by, or perhaps saw him as some extra enhancement of whatever dream it was they were living. Flick, flick. Scheherazade's Baghdad. John Carter's Mars. It really didn't matter that you were still in Paris, although Elanore, of course, had showed sensitivity in the place she had selected for their meeting.

Beyond the last of the reality engines, Gustav's own cheap unvirtual tenement loomed into view. He picked his way across the tarmac toward the faint neon of the foreal Spar store beside it. Inside, there were the usual grey slabs of packaging with tiny windows promising every possible delight. He wandered up the aisles and activated the homely presence of the woman who served the dozen or so anachronistic places that were still scattered around Paris. She smiled at him—a living ghost, really; but then, people seemed to

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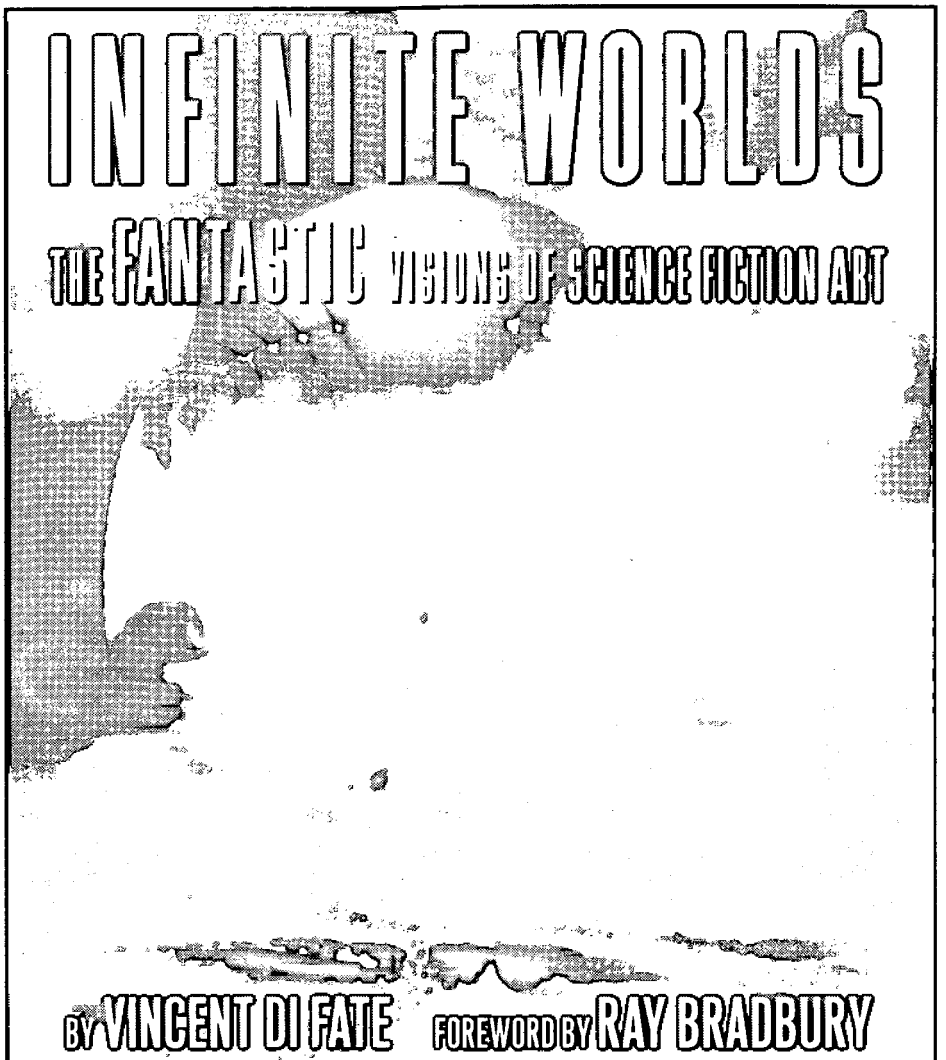

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prefer the illusion of the personal touch. Behind her, he noticed, was an antiquated cigarette machine. He ordered a packet of Disc Bleu, and palmed what were probably the last of his credits—which amounted to half a stick of charcoal or two squeezes-worth of Red Lake. It was a surprise to him, in fact, that he even had enough for these cigarettes.

Outside, ignoring the health warning that flashed briefly before his eyes, he lighted a Disc Bleu, put it to his lips, and deeply inhaled. A few moments later, he was in a nauseous sweat, doubled up and gasping.

Another bleak morning, timeless and grey. This ceiling, these walls. And Elanore . . . Elanore was dead. Gone.

Gustav belched on the wine he was sure that he'd drunk, and smelled the sickness and the smoke of that foreal Disc Bleu still clinging to him. But there was no trace of Elanore. Not a copper strand of hair on his shoulder or curled around his cock, not her scent riming his hands.

He closed his eyes and tried to picture a woman in a white chemise bathing in a river's shallows, two bearded men talking animatedly in a grassy space beneath the trees, and Elanore sitting naked close by, although she watches rather than joins in their conversation. . . .

No. That wasn't it.

Somehow getting up, pissing cloudily into the appropriate receptacle, Gustav finally grunted in unsurprise when he noticed a virtual light flickering through the heaped and broken frames of his easels. Unlike the telephone, he was sure that the company had disconnected his terminal long ago. His head fizzing, his groin vaguely tumescent, some lost bit of the night nagging like a stray scrap of meat between his teeth, he gazed down into the spinning options that the screen offered.

It was Elanore's work, of course—or the ghost of entangled electrons that Elanore had become. Hey presto!—Gustav was back on line; granted this shimmering link into the lands of the dead and the living. He saw that he even had positive credit, which explained why he'd been able to buy that packet of Disc Bleu. He'd have slammed his fist down into the thing if it would have done any good.

Instead, he scowled at his room, the huddled backs of the canvases, the drifts of discarded food and clothing, the heap of his bed, wondering if Elanore was watching him now, thrusting a spare few gigabytes into the sensors of some nano-insect that was hovering close beside him. Indeed, he half-expected the thin partitions and dangling wires, all the mocking rubbish of his life, to shudder and change into snowy Russian parkland, a wooded glade, even Paris again, 1890. But none of that happened.

The positive credit light still glowed enticingly within the terminal. In the almost certain knowledge that he would regret it, but quite unable to stop himself, Gustav scrolled through the pathways that led him to the little-frequented section dealing with artists' foreal requisites. Keeping it simple—down to fresh brushes, and Lefranc and Bourgeois's extra fine Flake White, Cadmium Yellow, Vermilion, Deep Madder, Cobalt Blue, and Emerald Green—and still waiting as the cost all of that clocked up for the familiar credit-expired sign to arrive, he closed the screen.

The materials arrived far more quickly than he'd expected, disgorging themselves into a service alcove in the far corner with a whoosh like the wind. The supplier had even remembered to include the fresh bottles of turpentine he'd forgotten to order—he still had plenty of clean stretched can-

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vases anyway. So here (the feel of the fat new tubes, the beautiful, haunting names of the colors, the faint stirring sounds that the brushes made when he tried to lift them) was everything he might possibly need.

Gustav was an artist.

The hours did funny things when Gustav was painting—or even thinking about painting. They ran fast or slow, passed by on a fairy breeze, or thickened and grew huge as megaliths, then joined up and began to dance lumberingly around him, stamping on every sensibility and hope.

Taking fierce drags of his last Disc Bleu, clouding his tenement's already filmy air, Gustav finally gave up scribbling on his pad and casting sidelong glances at the canvas as the blazing moon began to flood Paris with its own sickly version of evening. As he'd always known he'd probably end up doing, he then began to wander the dim edges of his room, tilting back and examining his old, unsold, and generally unfinished canvases. Especially in this light, and seen from upside down, the scenes of foreal Paris looked suitably wan. There was so little to them, in fact, such a thinness and lack of color, that they could easily be re-used. But here in the tangled shadows of the furthest corner, filled with colors that seemed to pour into the air like a perfume, lay his early attempts at Symbolism and Impressionism. . . . Amid those, he noticed something paler again. In fact, unfinished—but from an era when, as far as he could recall, he'd finished everything. He risked lifting the canvas out, and gazed at the outlines, the dabs of paint, the layers of wash. He recognized it now. It had been his attempt at Manet's *Olympia.*

After Elanore had said her goodbyes to all her friends, she retreated into the white virtual corridors of a building near the Cimetière du Père Lachaise that might once have been called a hospital. There, as a final fail-safe, her mind was scanned and stored, the lineaments of her body were recorded. Gustav was the only person Elanore allowed to visit her during those last weeks; she was perhaps already too confused to understand what seeing her like this was doing to him. He'd sit amid the webs of silver monitoring wires as she absently stroked Metzengerstein, and the cat's eyes, now far greener and brighter than hers, regarded him. She didn't seem to want to fight this loss of self. That was probably the thing that hurt him most. Elanore, the proper foreal Elanore, had always been searching for the next river to cross, the next challenge; it was probably the one characteristic that they had shared. But now she accepted death, this loss of Elanore, with nothing but resignation. *This is the way it is for all of us,* Gustav remembered her saying in one of the last cogent periods before she forgot his name. *So many of our friends have passed on already. It's just a matter of joining them. . . .*

Elanore never quite lost her beauty, but she became like a doll, a model of herself, and her eyes grew vacant as she sat silent or talked ramblingly. The freckles faded from her skin. Her mouth grew slack. She began to smell sour. There was no great fuss made when they finally turned her off, although Gustav still insisted that he be there. It was a relief, in fact, when Elanore's eyes finally closed and her heart stopped beating, when the hand he'd placed in his turned even more flaccid and cold. Metzengerstein gave Gustav one final glance before it twisted its way between the wires, leapt off the bed, and padded from the room, its tail raised. For a moment, Gustav considered grabbing the thing, slamming it down into a pulp of memory circuits and flesh and metal. But it had already been de-programmed. Metzengerstein was just

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a shell; a comforter for Elanore in her last dim days. He never saw the creature again.

Just as the living Elanore had promised, her ghost only returned to Gustav after a decent interval. And she made no assumptions about their future at that first meeting on the neutral ground of a shorefront restaurant in virtual Balbec. She clearly understood how difficult all this was for him. It had been a windy day, he remembered, and the tablecloths flapped, the napkins threatened to take off, the lapel of the cream brocade jacket she was wearing kept flying across her throat until she pinned it back with a brooch. She told him that she still loved him, and that she hoped they would be able to stay together. A few days later, in a room in the same hotel overlooking the same windy beach, Elanore and Gustav made love for the first time since she had died.

The illusion, Gustav had to admit, then and later, was always perfect. And, as the dying Elanore had pointed out, they both already knew many ghosts. There was Marcel, for instance, and there was Jean, Gustav's own dealer and agent. It wasn't as if Elanore had even been left with any choice. In a virtual, ghostly daze himself, Gustav agreed that they should set up home together. They chose Brittany, because it was new to them—unloaded with memories—and the scenery was still often decent and visible enough to be worth painting.

Foreal was going out of style by then. For many years, the technologies of what was called reality had been flawless. But now, they became all-embracing. It was at about this time, Gustav supposed, although his memory once again was dim on this matter, that they set fire to the moon. The ever-bigger reality engines required huge amounts of power—and so it was that the robot ships set out, settled into orbit around the moon, and began to spray the surface with antimatter, spreading their wings like hands held out to a fire to absorb and then transmit back to earth the energies this iridescence gave. The power the moon now provided wasn't quite limitless, but it was near enough. With so much alternative joy and light available, the foreal world, much like a garden left untended, soon began to assume a look of neglect.

Ever-considerate to his needs, Elanore chose and had refurbished a gabled clifftop mansion near Locronan, and ordered graceful and foreal furniture at huge extra expense. For a month or so, until the powerlines and transformers of the reality engines had been installed, Gustav and Elanore could communicate with each other only by screen. He did his best to tell himself that being unable to touch her was a kind of tease, and kept his thoughts away from such questions as where exactly Elanore was when she wasn't with him, and if she truly imagined she was the seamless continuation of the living Elanore that she claimed herself to be.

The house smelled of salt and old stone, and then of wet plaster and new carpets, and soon began to look as charming and eccentric as anything Elanore had organized in her life. As for the cost of all this forgotten craftsmanship, which even in these generous times was quite daunting, Elanore had discovered, like many of the ghosts who had gone before her, that her work—the dealing in stocks, ideas, and raw megawatts in which she specialized—was suddenly much easier. She could flit across the world, make deals based on long-term calculations that no living person could ever hope to understand.

Often, in the early days when Elanore finally reached the reality of their clifftop house in Brittany, Gustav would find himself gazing at her, trying to

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catch her unawares, or, in the nights when they made love with an obsessive frequency and passion, he would study her whilst she was sleeping. If she seemed distracted, he put it down to some deal she was cooking, a new anti-matter trail across the Sea of Storms, perhaps, or a business meeting in Capetown. If she sighed and smiled in her dreams, he imagined her in the arms of some long-dead lover.

Of course, Elanore always denied such accusations. She even gave a good impression of being hurt. She was, she insisted, configured to ensure that she was always exactly where she appeared to be, except for brief times and in the gravest of emergencies. In the brain or on the net, human consciousness was a fragile thing—permanently in danger of dissolving. *I really* am *talking to you now, Gustav.* Otherwise, Elanore maintained, she would unravel, she would cease to be Elanore. As if, Gustav thought in generally silent rejoinder, she hadn't ceased to be Elanore already.

She'd changed, for a start. She was cooler, calmer, yet somehow more mercurial. The simple and everyday motions she made, like combing her hair or stirring coffee, began to look stiff and affected. Even her sexual preferences had changed. And passing over *was* different. Yes, she admitted that, even though she could feel the weight and presence of her own body just as she could feel his when he touched her. Once, as the desperation of their arguments increased, she even insisted on stabbing herself with a fork, just so that he might finally understand that she felt pain. But for Gustav, Elanore wasn't like the many other ghosts he'd met and readily accepted. They weren't *Elanore.* He'd never loved and painted *them.*

Gustav soon found that he couldn't paint Elanore now, either. He tried from sketches and from memory; once or twice he got her to pose. But it didn't work. He couldn't quite loose himself enough to forget what she was. They even tried to complete that *Olympia,* although the memory was painful for both of them. She posed for him as Manet's model, who in truth she did look a little like; the same model who'd posed for that odd scene by the river, *Dejéuner sur l'Herbe.* Now, of course, the cat as well as the black maid had to be a projection, although they did their best to make everything else the same. But there was something lost and wan about the painting as he tried to develop it. The nakedness of the woman on the canvas no longer gave off strength and knowledge and sexual assurance. She seemed pliant and helpless. Even the colors grew darker; it was like fighting smoke in a dream.

Elanore accepted Gustav's difficulties with what he sometimes found to be chillingly good grace. She was prepared to give him time. He could travel. She could develop new interests, burrow within the net as she'd always promised herself, and live in some entirely different place.

Gustav began to take long walks away from the house, along remote clifftop paths and across empty beaches, where he could be alone. The moon and the sun sometimes cast their silver ladders across the water. Soon, Gustav thought sourly, there'll be nowhere left to escape *to.* Or perhaps we will *all* pass on, and the gantries and the ugly virtual buildings that all look like the old Pompidou Center will cease to be necessary; but for the glimmering of a few electrons, the world will revert to the way it was before people came. We can even extinguish the moon.

He also started to spend more time in the few parts of their rambling house that, largely because much of the stuff they wanted was hand-built and took some time to order, Elanore hadn't yet had fitted out foreal. He interrogated the house's mainframe to discover the codes that would turn the reality en-

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gines off and on at will. In a room filled with tapestries, a long oak table, a vase of hydrangeas, pale curtains lifting slightly in the breeze, all it took was the correct gesture, a mere click of his fingers, and it would shudder and vanish, to be replaced by nothing but walls of mildewed plaster, the faint tingling sensation that came from the receding powerfield. There—then gone. Only the foreal view at the window remained the same. And now, click, and it all came *back* again. Even the fucking vase. The fucking flowers.

Elanore sought him out that day. Gustav heard her footsteps on the stairs, and knew that she'd pretend to be puzzled as to why he wasn't working in his studio.

"*There* you are," she said, appearing a little breathless after her climb up the stairs. "I was thinking—"

Finally scratching the itch that he realized had been tickling him for some time, Gustav clicked his fingers. Elanore—and the whole room, the table, the flowers, the tapestries—flickered off.

He waited—several beats, he really didn't know how long. The wind still blew in through the window. The powerfield hummed faintly, waiting for its next command. He clicked his fingers. Elanore and the room took shape again.

"I thought you'd probably override that," he said. "I imagined you'd given yourself a higher priority than the furniture."

"I could if I wished," she said. "I didn't think I'd need to do such a thing."

"No. I mean, you can just go somewhere else, can't you? Some other room in this house. Some other place. Some other continent . . . "

"I keep telling you. It isn't like that."

"I know. Consciousness is fragile."

"And we're really not that different, Gus. I'm made of random droplets held in a force field—but what are *you?* Think about it. You're made of atoms, which are just quantum flickers in the foam of space, particles that aren't even particles at all. . . ."

Gustav stared at her. He was remembering—he couldn't help it—that they'd made love the previous night. Just two different kinds of ghost; entwined, joining—he supposed that that was what she was saying. And what about my *cock,* Elanore, and all the stuff that gets emptied into you when we're fucking? What the hell do you do with *that?*

"Look, Gus, this isn't—"

"—And what do you dream at night, Elanore? What is it that you do when you pretend you're sleeping?"

She waved her arms in a furious gesture that Gustav almost recognized from the Elanore of old. "What the hell do you *think* I do, Gus? I *try* to be human. You think it's easy, do you, hanging on like this? You think I enjoy watching *you* flicker in and out?—which is basically what it's like for me every time you step outside these fields? Sometimes I just wish I . . . "

Elanore trailed off there, glaring at him with emerald eyes. Go on, Gustav felt himself urging her. *Say* it, you phantom, shade, wraith, ghost. Say you wish you'd simply died. But instead, she made some internal command of her own, and blanked the room—and vanished.

It was the start of the end of their relationship.

Many guests came to visit their house in the weeks after that, and Elanore and Gustav kept themselves busy in the company of the dead and the living. All the old crowd, all the old jokes. Gustav generally drank too much, and

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made his presence unwelcome with the female ghosts as he decided that once he'd fucked the nano-droplets in one configuration, he might as well try fucking them in another. What the hell was it, Gus wondered, that made the living so reluctant to give up the dead, and the dead to give up the living?

In the few hours that they did spend together and alone at that time, Elanore and Gustav made detailed plans to travel. The idea was that they (meaning Elanore, with all the credit she was accumulating) would commission a ship, a sailing ship, traditional in every respect apart from the fact that the sails would be huge power receptors driven directly by the moon, and the spars would be the frame of a reality engine. Together, they would get away from all of this, and sail across the foreal oceans, perhaps even as far as Tahiti. Admittedly, Gustav was intrigued by the idea of returning to the painter who by now seemed to be the initial wellspring of his creativity. He was certainly in a suitably grumpy and isolationist mood to head off, as the poverty-stricken and desperate Gauguin had once done, in search of inspiration in the South Seas; and ultimately to his death from the prolonged effects of syphilis. But they never actually discussed what Tahiti would be *like*. Of course, there would be no tourists there now—only eccentrics bothered to travel foreal these days. Gustav liked to think, in fact, that there would be none of the tall ugly buildings and the huge Coca-Cola signs that he'd once seen in an old photograph of Tahiti's main town of Papeete. There might—who knows?—not be any reality engines, even, squatting like spiders across the beaches and jungle. With the understandable way that the birthrate was now declining, there would be just a few natives left, living as they had once lived before Cook and Bligh and all the rest—even Gauguin with his art and his myths and his syphilis—had ruined it for them. That was how Gustav wanted to leave Tahiti.

Winter came to their clifftop house. The guests departed. The wind raised white crests across the ocean. Gustav developed a habit, which Elanore pretended not to notice, of turning the heating down; as if he needed chill and discomfort to make the place seem real. Tahiti, that ship of theirs, remained an impossibly long way off. There were no final showdowns—just this gradual drifting apart. Gustav gave up trying to make love to Elanore, just as he had given up trying to paint her. But they were friendly and cordial with each other. It seemed that neither of them wished to pollute the memory of something that had once been wonderful. Elanore was, Gustav knew, starting to become concerned about his failure to have his increasing signs of age treated, and his refusal to have a librarian; even his insistence on pursuing a career that seemed only to leave him depleted and damaged. But she never said anything.

They agreed to separate for a while. Elanore would head off to explore pure virtuality. Gustav would go back to foreal Paris and try to rediscover his art. And so, making promises they both knew they would never keep, Gustav and Elanore finally parted.

Gustav slid his unfinished *Olympia* back down amid the other canvases. He looked out of the window, and saw from the glow coming up through the gaps in the houses that the big reality engines were humming. The evening, or whatever other time and era it was, was in full swing.

A vague idea forming in his head, Gustav pulled on his coat and headed out from his tenement. As he walked down through the misty, smoggy streets, it almost began to feel like inspiration. Such was his absorption that

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he didn't even bother to avoid the shining bubbles of the reality engines. Paris, at the end of the day, still being Paris, the realities he passed through mostly consisted of one or another sort of café, but they were set amid dazzling souks, dank medieval alleys, yellow and seemingly watery places where swam strange creatures that he couldn't think to name. But his attention wasn't on it anyway.

The Musée D'Orsay was still kept in reasonably immaculate condition beside the faintly luminous and milky Seine. Outside and in, it was well-lit, and a trembling barrier kept in the air that was necessary to preserve its contents until the time came when they were fashionable again. Inside, it even *smelled* like an art gallery, and Gustav's footsteps echoed on the polished floors, and the robot janitors greeted him; in every way, and despite all the years since he'd last visited, the place was the same.

Gustav walked briskly past the statues and the bronze casts, past Ingres' big, dead canvases of supposedly voluptuous nudes. Then Moreau, early Degas, Corot, Millet . . . Gustav did his best to ignore them all. For the fact was that Gustav hated art galleries—he was still, at least, a painter in that respect. Even in the years when he'd gone deliberately to such places, because he knew that they were good for his own development, he still liked to think of himself as a kind of burglar—get in, grab your ideas, get out again. Everything else, all the ahhs and the oohs, was for mere spectators. . . .

He took the stairs to the upper floor. A cramp had worked its way beneath his diaphragm and his throat felt raw, but behind all of that there was this feeling, a tingling of power and magic and anger—a sense that perhaps . . .

Now that he was up amid the rooms and corridors of the great Impressionist works, he forced himself to slow down. The big gilt frames, the pompous marble, the names and dates of artists who had often died in anonymity, despair, disease, blindness, exile, near-starvation. Poor old Sisley's *Misty Morning*. Vincent Van Gogh in a self portrait formed from deep, sensuous, three-dimensional oils. Genuinely great art was, Gustav thought, pretty depressing for would-be great artists. If it hadn't been for the invisible fields that were protecting these paintings, he would have considered ripping the things off the walls, destroying them.

His feet led him back to the Manets, that woman gazing out at him from *Dejéuner sur l'Herbe,* and then again from *Olympia*. She wasn't beautiful, didn't even look much like Elanore. . . . But that wasn't the point. He drifted on past the clamoring canvases, wondering if the world had ever been this bright, this new, this wondrously chaotic. Eventually, he found himself face to face with the surprisingly few Gauguins that the Musée D'Orsay possessed. Those bright slabs of color, those mournful Tahitian natives, which were often painted on raw sacking because it was all Gauguin could get his hands on in the hot stench of his tropical hut. He became wildly fashionable after his death, of course; the idea of destitution on a far-away isle suddenly stuck everyone as romantic. But it was too late for Gauguin by then. And too late—as his hitherto worthless paintings were snapped up by Russians, Danes, Englishmen, Americans—for these stupid, habitually arrogant Parisians. Gauguin was often poor at dealing with his shapes, but he generally got away with it. And his sense of color was like no one else's. Gustav remembered vaguely now that there was a nude that Gauguin had painted as his own lopsided tribute to Manet's *Olympia*—had even pinned a photograph of it to the wall of his hut as he worked. But, like most of Gauguin's other really important paintings, it wasn't here at the Musée D'Orsay, this supposed

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epicenter of Impressionist and Symbolist art. Gustav shrugged and turned away. He hobbled slowly back down through the galley.

Outside, beneath the moonlight, amid the nanosmog and the buzzing of the powerfields, Gustav made his way once again through the realities. An English tea house circa 1930. A Guermantes salon. If they'd been foreal, he'd have sent the cups and the plates flying, bellowed in the self-satisfied faces of the dead and living. Then he stumbled into a scene he recognized from the Musée D'Orsay, one, in fact, that had once been as much a cultural icon as Madonna's tits or a Beatles tune. *Le Moulin de la Galette.* He was surprised and almost encouraged to see Renoir's Parisian figures in their Sunday-best clothing dancing under the trees in the dappled sunlight, or chatting at the surrounding benches and tables. He stood and watched, nearly smiling. Glancing down, he saw that he was dressed appropriately in a rough woolen navy suit. He studied the figures, admiring their animation, the clever and, yes, convincing way that, through some trick of reality, they were composed. . . . Then he realized that he recognized some of the faces, and that they had also recognized him. Before he could turn back, he was called to and beckoned over.

"Gustav," Marcel's ghost said, sliding an arm around him, smelling of male sweat and Pernod. "Grab a chair. Sit down. Long time no see, eh?"

Gustav shrugged and accepted the brimming tumbler of wine that he offered. If it was foreal—which he doubted—this and a few more of the same might help him sleep tonight. "I thought you were in Venice," he said. "As the Doge."

Marcel shrugged. There were breadcrumbs on his mustache. "That was *ages* ago. Where have you been, Gustav?"

"Just around the corner, actually."

"Not still *painting,* are you?"

Gustav allowed that question to be lost in the music and the conversation's ebb and flow. He gulped his wine and looked around, expecting to see Elanore at any moment. So many of the others were here—it was almost like old times. There, even, was Francine, dancing with a top-hatted man—so she clearly wasn't across the sky. Gustav decided to ask the girl in the striped dress who was nearest to him if she'd seen Elanore. He realized as he spoke to her that her face was familiar to him, but he somehow couldn't recollect her name—even whether she was living or a ghost. She shook her head, and asked the woman who stood leaning behind her. But she, also, hadn't seen Elanore; not, at least, since the times when Marcel was in Venice and when Francine was across the sky. From there, the question rippled out across the square. But no one, it seemed, knew what had happened to Elanore.

Gustav stood up and made his way between the twirling dancers and the lantern-strung trees. His skin tingled as he stepped out of the reality, and the laughter and the music suddenly faded. Avoiding any other such encounters, he made his way back up the dim streets to his tenement.

There, back at home, the light from the setting moon was bright enough for him to make his way through the dim wreckage of his life without falling—and the terminal that Elanore's ghost had reactivated still gave off a virtual glow. Swaying, breathless, Gustav paged down into his accounts, and saw the huge sum—the kind of figure that he associated with astronomy, with the distance of the moon from the earth, the earth from the sun—that now appeared there. Then, he passed back through the terminal's levels, and began to search for Elanore.

But Elanore wasn't there.

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* * *

Gustav was painting. When he felt like this, he loved and hated the canvas in almost equal measures. The outside world, foreal or in reality, ceased to exist for him.

A woman, naked, languid, and with a dusky skin quite unlike Elanore's, is lying upon a couch, half-turned, her face cupped in her hand that lies upon the primrose pillow, her eyes gazing away from the onlooker at something far off. She seems beautiful but unerotic, vulnerable yet clearly available, and self-absorbed. Behind her—amid the twirls of bright yet gloomy decoration—lies a glimpse of stylized rocks under a strange sky, whilst two oddly disturbing figures are talking, and a dark bird perches on the lip of a balcony; perhaps a raven. . . .

Although he detests plagiarism, and is working solely from memory, Gustav finds it hard to break away from Gauguin's nude on this canvas he is now painting. But he really isn't fighting that hard to do so, anyway. In this above all of Gauguin's great paintings, stripped of the crap and the despair and the self-justifying symbolism, Gauguin was simply *right*. So Gustav still keeps working, and the paint sometimes almost seems to want to obey him. He doesn't know or care at the moment what the thing will turn out like. If it's good, he might think of it as his tribute to Elanore; and if it isn't . . . well, he knows that, once he's finished this painting, he will start another one. Right now, that's all that matters.

Elanore was right, Gustav decides, when she once said that he was entirely selfish, and would sacrifice everything—himself included—just so that he could continue to paint. She was eternally right and, in her own way, she too was always searching for the next challenge, the next river to cross. Of course, they should have made more of the time that they had together, but as Elanore's ghost admitted at that Van Gogh café when she finally came to say goodbye, nothing could ever quite be the same.

Gustav stepped back from his canvas and studied it, eyes half-closed at first just to get the shape, then with a more appraising gaze. Yes, he told himself, and reminded himself to tell himself again later when he began to feel sick and miserable about it, this is a true work. This is worthwhile.

Then, and although there was much that he still had to do, and the oils were still wet, and he knew that he should rest the canvas, he swirled his brush in a blackish puddle of palette-mud and daubed the word NEVERMORE across the top, and stepped back again, wondering what to paint *next*. ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to our **new** address, **asimovs@erols.com**, or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's*, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625.

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THE PAST

Suppose the past were a place
Instead of a point in time,
A place where the people you knew
Were still paying bills,
Planning picnics and parties,
And lying awake,
Waiting for you to return.

Suppose some temporal travel agent
Could book you on a trip
Back to that place that's the Past
Where people you loved,
People you knew
Like the face in the mirror
Stayed, while you traveled on.

What would you say to those people
Who live in a place called Past,
Who'd expect you to be who you were
Not the stranger that you are now?

—Laura W. Haywood

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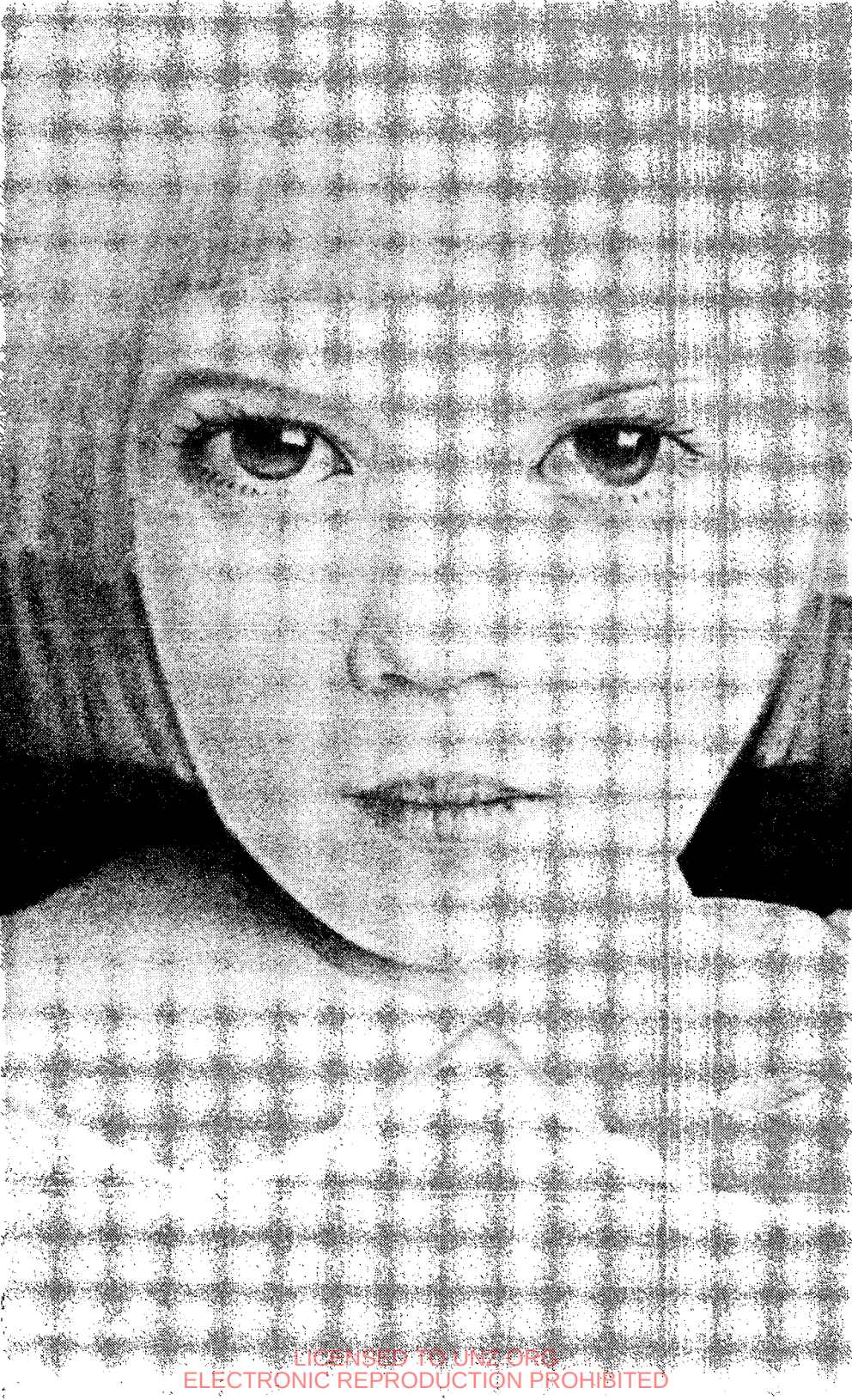
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Kristine Kathryn Rusch

ECHEA

Kristine Kathryn Rusch's 1998 publications will include the last two novels in her Fey series—*Fey 4: The Resistance* and *Fey 5: Victory*—as well as her mainstream hardcover, *Hitler's Angel*. She and her husband, Dean Wesley Smith, will also publish a novel, *Captain's Table*, in this summer's *Star Trek* crossover series. Her latest story for us is a heartbreaking tale about the many different kinds of loss.

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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I can close my eyes and she appears in my mind as she did the moment I first saw her: tiny, fragile, with unnaturally pale skin and slanted chocolate eyes. Her hair was white as the moon on a cloudless evening. It seemed, that day, that her eyes were the only spot of color on her haggard little face. She was seven, but she looked three.

And she acted like nothing we had ever encountered before.

Or since.

We had three children and a good life. We were not impulsive, but we did feel as if we had something to give. Our home was large, and we had money; any child would benefit from that.

It seemed to be for the best.

It all started with the brochures. We saw them first at an outdoor café near our home. We were having lunch when we glimpsed floating dots of color, a fleeting child's face. Both my husband and I touched them only to have the displays open before us:

The blank vista of the Moon, the Earth over the horizon like a giant blue and white ball, a looming presence, pristine and healthy and somehow guilt-ridden. The Moon itself looked barren, as it always had, until one focused. And then one saw the pockmarks, the shattered dome open to the stars. In the corner of the first brochure I opened, at the very edge of the reproduction, were blood-splotches. They were scattered on the craters and boulders, and had left fist-sized holes in the dust. I didn't need to be told what had caused it. We saw the effects of high velocity rifles in low gravity every time we downloaded the news.

The brochures began with the Moon, and ended with the faces of refugees: pallid, worn, defeated. The passenger shuttles to Earth had pretty much stopped. At first, those who could pay came here, but by the time we got our brochures, Earth passage had changed. Only those with living relatives were able to return. Living relatives who were willing to acknowledge the relationship—and had official hard copy to prove it.

The rules were waived in the case of children, of orphans and of underage war refuges. They were allowed to come to Earth if their bodies could tolerate it, if they were willing to be adopted, and if they were willing to renounce any claims they had to Moon land.

They had to renounce the stars in order to have a home.

We picked her up in Sioux Falls, the nearest star shuttle stop and detention center to our home. The shuttle stop was a desolate place. It was designed as an embarkation point for political prisoners and for star soldiers. It was built on the rolling prairie, a sprawling complex with laser fences shimmering in the sunlight. Guards stood at every entrance, and several hovered above. We were led, by men with laser rifles, into the main compound, a building finished almost a century before, made of concrete and steel, functional, cold, and ancient. Its halls smelled musty. The concrete flaked, covering everything with a fine gray dust.

Echea had flown in on a previous shuttle. She had been in detox and sick bay; through psychiatric exams and physical screenings. We did not know we would get her until they called our name.

We met her in a concrete room with no windows, shielded against the sun, shielded against the world. The area had no furniture.

A door opened and a child appeared.

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Tiny, pale, fragile. Eyes as big as the moon itself, and darker than the blackest night. She stood in the center of the room, legs spread, arms crossed, as if she were already angry at us.

Around us, through us, between us, a computer voice resonated:

This is Echea. She is yours. Please take her, and proceed through the doors to your left. The waiting shuttle will take you to your preassigned destination.

She didn't move when she heard the voice, although I started. My husband had already gone toward her. He crouched and she glowered at him.

"I don't need you," she said.

"We don't need you either," he said. "But we want you."

The hard set to her chin eased, just a bit. "Do you speak for her?" she asked, indicating me.

"No," I said. I knew what she wanted. She wanted reassurance early that she wouldn't be entering a private war zone as difficult and devastating as the one she left. "I speak for myself. I'd like it if you came home with us, Echea."

She stared at us both then, not relinquishing power, not changing that forceful stance. "Why do you want me?" she asked. "You don't even know me."

"But we will," my husband said.

"And then you'll send me back," she said, her tone bitter. I heard the fear in it.

"You won't go back," I said. "I promise you that."

It was an easy promise to make. None of the children, even if their adoptions did not work, returned to the Moon.

A bell sounded overhead. They had warned us about this, warned us that we would have to move when we heard it.

"It's time to leave," my husband said. "Get your things."

Her first look was shock and betrayal, quickly masked. I wasn't even sure I had seen it. And then she narrowed those lovely chocolate eyes. "I'm from the Moon," she said with a sarcasm that was foreign to our natural daughters. "We have no things."

What we knew of the Moon Wars on Earth was fairly slim. The news vids were necessarily vague, and I had never had the patience for a long lesson in Moon history.

The shorthand for the Moon situation was this: the Moon's economic resources were scarce. Some colonies, after several years of existence, were self-sufficient. Others were not. The shipments from Earth, highly valuable, were designated to specific places and often did not get there. Piracy, theft, and murder occurred to gain the scarce resources. Sometimes skirmishes broke out. A few times, the fighting escalated. Domes were damaged, and in the worst of the fighting, two colonies were destroyed.

At the time, I did not understand the situation at all. I took at face value a cynical comment from one of my professors: colonies always struggle for dominance when they are away from the mother country. I had even repeated it at parties.

I had not understood that it oversimplified one of the most complex situations in our universe.

I also had not understood the very human cost of such events.

That is, until I had Echea.

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* * *

We had ordered a private shuttle for our return, but it wouldn't have mattered if we were walking down a public street. I attempted to engage Echea, but she wouldn't talk. She stared out the window instead, and became visibly agitated as we approached home.

Lake Nebagamon is a small lake, one of the hundreds that dot northern Wisconsin. It was a popular resort for people from nearby Superior. Many had summer homes, some dating from the late 1800s. In the early 2000s, the summer homes were sold off. Most lots were bought by families who already owned land there, and hated the crowding at Nebagamon. My family bought fifteen lots. My husband's bought ten. Our marriage, some joked, was one of the most important local mergers of the day.

Sometimes I think that it was no joke. It was expected. There is affection between us, of course, and a certain warmth. But no real passion.

The passion I once shared with another man—a boy actually—was so long ago that I remember it in images, like a vid seen decades ago, or a painting made from someone else's life.

When my husband and I married, we acted like an acquiring conglomerate. We tore down my family's summer home because it had no potential or historical value, and we built onto my husband's. The ancient house became an estate with a grand lawn that rolled down to the muddy water. Evenings we sat on the verandah and listened to the cicadas until full dark. Then we stared at the stars and their reflections in our lake. Sometimes we were blessed with the northern lights, but not too often.

This is the place we brought Echea. A girl who had never really seen green grass or tall trees; who had definitely never seen lakes or blue sky or Earth's stars. She had, in her brief time in North Dakota, seen what they considered Earth—the brown dust, the fresh air. But her exposure had been limited, and had not really included sunshine or nature itself.

We did not really know how this would affect her.

There were many things we did not know.

Our girls were lined up on the porch in age order: Kally, the twelve-year-old, and the tallest, stood near the door. Susan, the middle child, stood next to her, and Anne stood by herself near the porch. They were properly stair-stepped, three years between them, a separation considered optimal for more than a century now. We had followed the rules in birthing them, as well as in raising them.

Echea was the only thing out of the norm.

Anne, the courageous one, approached us as we got off the shuttle. She was small for six, but still bigger than Echea. Anne also blended our heritages perfectly—my husband's bright blue eyes and light hair with my dark skin and exotic features. She would be our beauty some day, something my husband claimed was unfair, since she also had the brains.

"Hi," she said, standing in the middle of the lawn. She wasn't looking at us. She was looking at Echea.

Echea stopped walking. She had been slightly ahead of me. By stopping, she forced me to stop too.

"I'm not like them," she said. She was glaring at my daughters. "I don't want to be."

"You don't have to be," I said softly.

"But you can be civil," my husband said.

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Echea frowned at him, and in that moment, I think, their relationship was defined.

"I suppose you're the pampered baby," she said to Anne.

Anne grinned.

"That's right," she said. "I like it better than being the spoiled brat."

I held my breath. "Pampered baby" wasn't much different from "spoiled brat" and we all knew it.

"Do you have a spoiled brat?" Echea asked.

"No," Anne said.

Echea looked at the house, the lawn, the lake, and whispered. "You do now."

Later, my husband told me he heard this as a declaration. I heard it as awe. My daughters saw it as something else entirely.

"I think you have to fight Susan for it," Anne said.

"Do not!" Susan shouted from the porch.

"See?" Anne said. Then she took Echea's hand and led her up the steps.

That first night we awakened to screams. I came out of a deep sleep, already sitting up, ready to do battle. At first, I thought my link was on; I had lulled myself to sleep with a bedtime story. My link had an automatic shutoff, but I sometimes forgot to set it. With all that had been happening the last few days, I believed I might have done so again.

Then I noticed my husband sitting up as well, groggily rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

The screams hadn't stopped. They were piercing, shrill. It took me a moment to recognize them.

Susan.

I was out of bed before I realized it, running down the hall before I had time to grab my robe. My nightgown flapped around me as I ran. My husband was right behind me. I could hear his heavy steps on the hardwood floor.

When we reached Susan's room, she was sitting on the window seat, sobbing. The light of the full moon cut across the cushions and illuminated the rag rugs and the old-fashioned pink spread.

I sat down beside her and put my arm around her. Her frail shoulders were shaking, and her breath was coming in short gasps. My husband crouched before her, taking her hands in his.

"What happened, sweetheart?" I asked.

"I—I—I saw him," she said. "His face exploded, and the blood *floated* down."

"Were you watching vids again before sleep?" my husband asked in a sympathetic tone. We both knew if she said yes, in the morning she would get yet another lecture about being careful about what she put in her brain before it rested.

"No!" she wailed.

She apparently remembered those early lectures too.

"Then what caused this?" I asked.

"I don't *know!*" she said and burst into sobs again. I cradled her against me, but she didn't loosen her grip on my husband's hands.

"After his blood floated, what happened, baby?" my husband asked.

"Someone grabbed me," she said against my gown. "And pulled me away from him. I didn't want to go."

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"And then what?" My husband's voice was still soft.

"I woke up," she said, and her breath hitched.

I put my hand on her head and pulled her closer. "It's all right, sweetheart," I said. "It was just a dream."

"But it was so *real*," she said.

"You're here now," my husband said. "Right here. In your room. And we're right here with you."

"I don't want to go back to sleep," she said. "Do I have to?"

"Yes," I said, knowing it was better for her to sleep than be afraid of it. "Tell you what, though. I'll program House to tell you a soothing story, with a bit of music and maybe a few moving images. What do you say?"

"Dr. Seuss," she said.

"That's not always soothing," my husband said, obviously remembering how the House's *Cat in the Hat* program gave Kally a terror of anything feline.

"It is to Susan," I said gently, reminding him. In her third year, she played *Green Eggs and Ham* all night, the House's voice droning on and on, making me thankful that our room was at the opposite end of the hall.

But she was three no longer, and she hadn't wanted Dr. Seuss for years. The dream had really frightened her.

"If you have any more trouble, baby," my husband said to her, "you come and get us, all right?"

She nodded. He squeezed her hands, then I picked her up and carried her to bed. My husband pulled back the covers. Susan clung to me as I eased her down. "Will I go back there if I close my eyes?" she asked.

"No," I said. "You'll listen to House and sleep deeply. And if you dream at all, it'll be about nice things, like sunshine on flowers, and the lake in summertime."

"Promise?" she asked, her voice quavering.

"Promise," I said. Then I removed her hands from my neck and kissed each of them before putting them on the coverlet. I kissed her forehead. My husband did the same, and as we were leaving, she was ordering up the House reading program.

As I pulled the door closed, I saw the opening images of *Green Eggs and Ham* flicker across the wall.

The next morning, everything seemed fine. When I came down to breakfast, the chef had already placed the food on the table, each dish on its own warming plate. The scrambled eggs had the slightly runny look that indicated they had sat more than an hour—not even the latest design in warming plates could stop that. In addition, there was French toast, and Susan's favorites, waffles. The scent of fresh blueberry muffins floated over it all, and made me smile. The household staff had gone to great lengths to make Echea feel welcome.

My husband was already in his usual spot, e-conferencing while he sipped his coffee and broke a muffin apart with his fingers. His plate, showing the remains of eggs and ham, was pushed off to the side.

"Morning," I said as I slipped into my usual place on the other side of the table. It was made of oak and had been in my family since 1851, when my mother's people brought it over from Europe as a wedding present for my many-great grandparents. The housekeeper kept it polished to a shine, and she only used linen placemats to protect it from the effects of food.

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My husband acknowledged me with a blueberry-stained hand as laughter made me look up. Kally came in, her arm around Susan. Susan still didn't look herself. She had deep circles under her eyes, which meant that *Green Eggs and Ham* hadn't quite done the trick. She was too old to come get us—I had known that when we left her last night—but I hoped she hadn't spent the rest of the night listening to House, trying to find comfort in artificial voices and imagery.

The girls were still smiling when they saw me.

"Something funny?" I asked

"Echea," Kally said. "Did you know someone owned her dress before she did?"

No, I hadn't known that, but it didn't surprise me. My daughters, on the other hand, had owned only the best. Sometimes their knowledge of life—or lack thereof—shocked me.

"It's not an unusual way for people to save money," I said. "But it'll be the last pre-owned dress she'll have."

Mom? It was Anne, e-mailing me directly. The instant prompt appeared before my left eye. *Can you come up here?*

I blinked the message away, then sighed and pushed back my chair. I should have known the girls would do something that first morning. And the laughter should have prepared me.

"Remember," I said as I stood. "Only one main course. No matter what your father says."

"Ma!" Kally said.

"I mean it," I said, then hurried up the stairs. I didn't have to check where Anne was. She had sent me an image along with the e-mail—the door to Echea's room.

As I got closer, I heard Anne's voice.

"...didn't mean it. They're old poops."

"Poop" was Anne's worst word, at least so far. And when she used it, she put all so much emphasis on it the word became an epithet.

"It's my dress," Echea said. She sounded calm and contained, but I thought there was a raggedness to her voice that hadn't been there the day before. "It's all I have."

At that moment, I entered the room. Anne was on the bed, which had been carefully made up. If I hadn't tucked Echea in the night before, I never would have thought she had slept there.

Echea was standing near her window seat, gazing at the lawn as if she didn't dare let it out of her sight.

"Actually," I said, keeping my voice light. "You have an entire closet full of clothes."

Thanks, Mom, Anne sent me.

"Those clothes are yours," Echea said.

"We've adopted you," I said. "What's ours is yours."

"You don't get it," she said. "This dress is *mine*. It's all I have."

She had her arms wrapped around it, her hands gripping it as if we were going to take it away.

"I know," I said softly. "I know, sweetie-baby. You can keep it. We're not trying to take it away from you."

"They said you would."

"Who?" I asked, with a sinking feeling. I already knew who. My other two daughters. "Kally and Susan?"

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She nodded.

"Well, they're wrong," I said. "My husband and I make the rules in this house. I will never take away something of yours. I promise."

"Promise?" she whispered.

"Promise," I said. "Now how about breakfast?"

She looked at Anne for confirmation, and I wanted to hug my youngest daughter. She had already decided to care for Echea, to ally with her, to make Echea's entrance into the household easier.

I was so proud of her.

"Breakfast," Anne said, and I heard a tone in her voice I'd never heard before. "It's the first meal of the day."

The government had fed the children standard nutrition supplements, in beverage form. Echea hadn't taken a meal on Earth until she'd joined us.

"You name your meals?" she asked Anne. "You have that many of them?" Then she put a hand over her mouth, as if she were surprised she had let the questions out.

"Three of them," I said, trying to sound normal. Instead I felt defensive, as if we had too much. "We only have three of them."

The second night, we had no disturbances. By the third, we had developed a routine. I spent time with my girls, and then I went into Echea's room. She didn't like House or House's stories. House's voice, no matter how I programmed it, scared her. It made me wonder how we were going to link her when the time came. If she found House intrusive, imagine how she would find the constant barrage of information services, of instant e-mail scrolling across her eyes, or sudden images appearing inside her head. She was almost past the age where a child adapted easily to a link. We had to calm her quickly or risk her suffering a disadvantage for the rest of her life.

Perhaps it was the voice that upset her. The reason links made sound optional was because too many people had had trouble distinguishing the voices inside their head. Perhaps Echea would be one of them.

It was time to find out.

I had yet to broach the topic with my husband. He seemed to have cooled toward Echea immediately. He thought Echea abnormal because she wasn't like our girls. I reminded him that Echea hadn't had the advantages, to which he responded that she had the advantages *now*. He felt that since her life had changed, she should change.

Somehow I didn't think it worked like that.

It was on the second night that I realized she was terrified of going to sleep. She kept me as long as she could, and when I finally left, she asked to keep the lights on.

House said she had them on all night, although the computer clocked her even breathing starting at 2:47 A.M.

On the third night, she asked me questions. Simple ones, like the one about breakfast, and I answered them without my previous defensiveness. I held my emotions back, my shock that a child would have to ask what that pleasant ache was in her stomach after meals ("You're full, Echea. That's your stomach telling you it's happy.") or why we insisted on bathing at least once a day ("People stink if they don't bathe often, Echea. Haven't you noticed?"). She asked the questions with her eyes averted, and her hands clenched against the coverlet. She knew that she should know the answers, she knew better than to ask my older two daughters or my husband, and she tried ever so hard to be sophisticated.

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Already, the girls had humiliated her more than once. The dress incident had blossomed into an obsession with them, and they taunted her about her unwillingness to attach to anything. She wouldn't even claim a place at the dining room table. She seemed convinced that we would toss her out at the first chance.

On the fourth night, she addressed that fear. Her question came at me sideways, her body more rigid than usual.

"If I break something," she asked, "what will happen?"

I resisted the urge to ask what she had broken. I knew she hadn't broken anything. House would have told me, even if the girls hadn't.

"Echea," I said, sitting on the edge of her bed, "are you afraid that you'll do something which will force us to get rid of you?"

She flinched as if I had struck her, then she slid down against the coverlet. The material was twisted in her hands, and her lower jaw was working even before she spoke.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Didn't they explain this to you before they brought you here?" I asked.

"They said nothing." That harsh tone was back in her voice, the tone I hadn't heard since that very first day, her very first comment.

I leaned forward and, for the first time, took one of those clenched fists into my hands. I felt the sharp knuckles against my palms, and the softness of the fabric brushing my skin.

"Echea," I said. "When we adopted you, we made you our child by law. We cannot get rid of you. No matter what. It is illegal for us to do so."

"People do illegal things," she whispered.

"When it benefits them," I said. "Losing you will not benefit us."

"You're saying that to be kind," she said.

I shook my head. The real answer was harsh, harsher than I wanted to state, but I could not leave it at this. She would not believe me. She would think I was trying to ease her mind. I was, but not through polite lies.

"No," I said. "The agreement we signed is legally binding. If we treat you as anything less than a member of our family, we not only lose you, we lose our other daughters as well."

I was particularly proud of adding the word "other." I suspected that, if my husband had been having this conversation with her, that he would have forgotten to add it.

"You would?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"This is true?" she asked.

"True," I said. "I can download the agreement and its ramifications for you in the morning. House can read you the standard agreement—the one everyone must sign—tonight if you like."

She shook her head, and pushed her hands harder into mine. "Could you—could you answer me one thing?" she asked.

"Anything," I said.

"I don't have to leave?"

"Not ever," I said.

She frowned. "Even if you die?"

"Even if we die," I said. "You'll inherit, just like the other girls."

My stomach knotted as I spoke. I had never mentioned the money to our own children. I figured they knew. And now I was telling Echea who was, for all intents and purposes, still a stranger.

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And an unknown one at that.

I made myself smile, made the next words come out lightly. "I suspect there are provisions against killing us in our beds."

Her eyes widened, then instantly filled with tears. "I would never do that," she said.

And I believed her.

As she grew more comfortable with me, she told me about her previous life. She spoke of it only in passing, as if the things that happened before no longer mattered to her. But in the very flatness with which she told them, I could sense deep emotions churning beneath the surface.

The stories she told were hair-raising. She had not, as I had assumed, been orphaned as an infant. She had spent most of her life with a family member who had died, and then she had been brought to Earth. Somehow, I had believed that she had grown up in an orphanage like the ones from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the ones Dickens wrote about, and the famous pioneer filmmakers had made Flats about. I had not realized that those places did not exist on the Moon. Either children were chosen for adoption, or they were left to their own devices, to survive on their own if they could.

Until she had moved in with us, she had never slept in a bed. She did not know it was possible to grow food by planting it, although she had heard rumors of such miracles.

She did not know that people could accept her for what she was, instead of what she could do for them.

My husband said that she was playing on my sympathies so that I would never let her go.

But I wouldn't have let her go anyway. I had signed the documents and made the verbal promise. And I cared for her. I would never let her go, any more than I would let a child of my flesh go.

I hoped, at one point, that he would feel the same.

As the weeks progressed, I was able to focus on Echea's less immediate needs. She was beginning to use House—her initial objection to it had been based on something that happened on the Moon, something she never fully explained—but House could not teach her everything. Anne introduced her to reading, and often Echea would read to herself. She caught on quickly, and I was surprised that she had not learned in her school on the Moon, until someone told me that most Moon colonies had no schools. The children were home-taught, which worked only for children with stable homes.

Anne also showed her how to program House to read things Echea did not understand. Echea made use of that as well. At night, when I couldn't sleep, I would check on the girls. Often I would have to open Echea's door, and turn off House myself. Echea would fall asleep to the drone of a deep male voice. She never used the vids. She simply liked the words, she said, and she would listen to them endlessly, as if she couldn't get enough.

I downloaded information on child development and learning curves, and it was as I remembered. A child who did not link before the age of ten was significantly behind her peers in all things. If she did not link before the age of twenty, she would never be able to function at an adult level in modern society.

Echea's link would be her first step into the world that my daughters already knew, the Earth culture denied so many who had fled to the Moon.

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After a bit of hesitation, I made an appointment with Ronald Caro, our Interface Physician.

Through force of habit, I did not tell my husband.

I had known my husband all my life, and our match was assumed from the beginning. We had a warm and comfortable relationship, much better than many among my peers. I had always liked my husband, and had always admired the way he worked his way around each obstacle life presented him.

One of those obstacles was Ronald Caro. When he arrived in St. Paul, after getting all his degrees and licenses and awards, Ronald Caro contacted me. He had known that my daughter Kally was in need of a link, and he offered to be the one to do it.

I would have turned him down, but my husband, always practical, checked on his credentials.

"How sad," my husband had said. "He's become one of the best Interface Physicians in the country."

I hadn't thought it sad. I hadn't thought it anything at all except inconvenient. My family had forbidden me to see Ronald Caro when I was sixteen, and I had disobeyed them.

All girls, particularly home-schooled ones, have on-line romances. Some progress to vid conferencing and virtual sex. Only a handful progress to actual physical contact. And of those that do, only a small fraction survive.

At sixteen, I ran away from home to be with Ronald Caro. He had been sixteen too, and gorgeous, if the remaining snapshot in my image memory were any indication. I thought I loved him. My father, who had been monitoring my e-mail, sent two police officers and his personal assistant to bring me home.

The resulting disgrace made me so ill that I could not get out of bed for six months. My then-future husband visited me each and every day of those six months, and it is from that period that most of my memories of him were formed. I was glad to have him; my father, who had been quite close to me, rarely spoke to me after I ran away with Ronald, and treated me as a stranger.

When Ronald reappeared in the Northland long after I had married, my husband showed his forgiving nature. He knew Ronald Caro was no longer a threat to us. He proved it by letting me take the short shuttle hop to the Twin Cities to have Kally linked.

Ronald did not act improperly toward me then or thereafter, although he often looked at me with a sadness I did not reciprocate. My husband was relieved. He always insisted on having the best, and because my husband was squeamish about brain work, particularly that which required chips, lasers, and remote placement devices, he preferred to let me handle the children's interface needs.

Even though I no longer wanted it, I still had a personal relationship with Ronald Caro. He did not treat me as a patient, or as the mother of his patients, but as a friend.

Nothing more.

Even my husband knew that.

Still, the afternoon I made the appointment, I went into our bedroom, made certain my husband was in his office, and closed the door. Then I used the link to send a message to Ronald.

Instantly his response flashed across my left eye.

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Are you all right? He sent, as he always did, as if he expected something terrible to have happened to me during our most recent silence.

Fine, I sent back, disliking the personal questions.

And the girls?

Fine also.

So, you linked to chat? Again, as he always did.

And I responded as I always did. *No. I need to make an appointment for Echea.*

The Moon Child?

I smiled. Ronald was the only person I knew, besides my husband, who didn't think we were insane for taking on a child not our own. But I felt that we could, and because we could, and because so many were suffering, we should.

My husband probably had his own reasons. We never really discussed them, beyond that first day.

The Moon Child, I responded. *Echea.*

Pretty name.

Pretty girl.

There was a silence, as if he didn't know how to respond to that. He had always been silent about my children. They were links he could not form, links to my husband that could not be broken, links that Ronald and I could never have.

She has no interface, I sent into that silence.

Not at all?

No.

Did they tell you anything about her?

Only that she'd been orphaned. You know, the standard stuff. I felt odd, sending that. I had asked for information, of course, at every step. And my husband had. And when we compared notes, I learned that each time we had been told the same thing—that we had asked for a child, and we would get one, and that child's life would start fresh with us. The past did not matter.

The present did.

How old is she?

Seven.

Hmmm. The procedure won't be involved, but there might be some dislocation. She's been alone in her head all this time. Is she stable enough for the change?

I was genuinely perplexed. I had never encountered an unlinked child, let alone lived with one. I didn't know what "stable" meant in that context.

My silence had apparently been answer enough.

I'll do an exam, he sent. *Don't worry.*

Good. I got ready to terminate the conversation.

You sure everything's all right there? he sent.

It's as right as it always is, I sent, and then severed the connection.

That night, I dreamed. It was an odd dream because it felt like a virtual reality vid, complete with emotions and all the five senses. But it had the distance of VR too—that strange sense that the experience was not mine.

I dreamed I was on a dirty, dusty street. The air was thin and dry. I had never felt air like this. It tasted recycled, and it seemed to suck the moisture from my skin. It wasn't hot, but it wasn't cold either. I wore a ripped shirt and ragged pants, and my shoes were boots made of a light material I had

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never felt before. Walking was easy and precarious at the same time. I felt lighter than ever, as if with one wrong gesture I would float.

My body moved easily in this strange atmosphere, as if it were used to it. I had felt something like it before: when my husband and I had gone to the Museum of Science and Technology in Chicago on our honeymoon. We explored the Moon exhibit, and felt firsthand what it was like to be in a colony environment.

Only that had been clean.

This wasn't.

The buildings were white plastic, covered with a filmy grit and pockmarked with time and use. The dirt on the ground seemed to get on everything, but I knew, as well as I knew how to walk in this imperfect gravity, that there wasn't enough money to pave the roads.

The light above was artificial, built into the dome itself. If I looked up, I could see the dome and the light, and if I squinted, I could see beyond to the darkness that was the unprotected atmosphere. It made me feel as if I were in a lighted glass porch on a starless night. Open, and vulnerable, and terrified, more because I couldn't see what was beyond than because I could.

People crowded the roadway and huddled near the plastic buildings. The buildings were domed too. Pre-fab, shipped up decades ago when Earth had hopes for the colonies. Now there were no more shipments, at least not here. We had heard that there were shipments coming to Colony Russia and Colony Europe, but no one confirmed the rumors. I was in Colony London, a bastard colony made by refugees and dissidents from Colony Europe. For a while, we had stolen their supply ships. Now, it seemed, they had stolen them back.

A man took my arm. I smiled up at him. His face was my father's face, a face I hadn't seen since I was twenty-five. Only something had altered it terribly. He was younger than I had ever remembered him. He was too thin and his skin filthy with dust. He smiled back at me, three teeth missing, lost to malnutrition, the rest blackened and about to go. In the past few days the whites of his eyes had turned yellow, and a strange mucus came from his nose. I wanted him to see the colony's medical facility or at least pay for an autodoc, but we had no credit, no means to pay at all.

It would have to wait until we found something.

"I think I found us free passage to Colony Latina," he said. His breath whistled through the gaps in his teeth. I had learned long ago to be far away from his mouth. The stench could be overpowering. "But you'll have to do them a job."

A job. I sighed. He had promised no more. But that had been months ago. The credits had run out, and he had gotten sicker.

"A big job?" I asked.

He didn't meet my gaze. "Might be."

"Dad—"

"Honey, we gotta use what we got."

It might have been his motto. *We gotta use what we got.* I'd heard it all my life. He'd come from Earth, he'd said, in one of the last free ships. Some of the others we knew said there were no free ships except for parolees, and I often wondered if he had come on one of those. His morals were certainly slippery enough.

I don't remember my mother. I'm not even sure I had one. I'd seen more than one adult buy an infant, and then proceed to exploit it for gain. It wouldn't have been beyond him.

But he loved me. That much was clear.

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And I adored him.

I'd have done the job just because he'd asked it.

I'd done it before.

The last job was how we'd gotten here. I'd been younger then and I hadn't completely understood.

But I'd understood when we were done.

And I'd hated myself.

"Isn't there another way?" I found myself asking.

He put his hand on the back of my head, propelling me forward. "You know better," he said. "There's nothing here for us."

"There might not be anything in Colony Latina, either."

"They're getting shipments from the U.N. Seems they vowed to negotiate a peace."

"Then everyone will want to go."

"But not everyone can," he said. "We can." He touched his pocket. I saw the bulge of his credit slip. "If you do the job."

It had been easier when I didn't know. When doing a job meant just that. When I didn't have other things to consider. After the first job, my father asked where I had gotten the morals. He said I hadn't inherited them from him, and I hadn't. I knew that. I suggested maybe Mother, and he had laughed, saying no mother who gave birth to me had morals either.

"Don't think about it, honey," he'd said. "Just do."

Just do. I opened my mouth—to say what, I don't know—and felt hot liquid splatter me. An exit wound had opened in his chest, spraying his blood all around. People screamed and backed away. I screamed. I didn't see where the shot had come from, only that it had come.

The blood moved slowly, more slowly than I would have expected.

He fell forward and I knew I wouldn't be able to move him, I wouldn't be able to grab the credit slip, wouldn't be able to get to Colony Latina, wouldn't have to do the job.

Faces, unbloodied faces, appeared around me.

They hadn't killed him for the slip.

I turned and ran, as he once told me to do, ran as fast as I could, blasting as I went, watching people duck or cover their ears or wrap their arms around their heads.

I ran until I saw the sign.

The tiny prefab with the Red Crescent painted on its door, the Red Cross on its windows. I stopped blasting and tumbled inside, bloody, terrified, and completely alone.

I woke up to find my husband's arms around me, my head buried in his shoulder. He was rocking me as if I were one of the girls, murmuring in my ear, cradling me and making me feel safe. I was crying and shaking, my throat raw with tears or with the aftereffects of screams.

Our door was shut and locked, something that we only did when we were amorous. He must have had House do it, so no one would walk in on us.

He stroked my hair, wiped the tears from my face. "You should leave your link on at night," he said tenderly. "I could have manipulated the dream, made it into something pleasant."

We used to do that for each other when we were first married. It had been a way to mesh our different sexual needs, a way to discover each other's thoughts and desires.

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We hadn't done it in a long, long time.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" he asked.

So I did.

He buried his face in my hair. It had been a long time since he had done that, too, since he had shown that kind of vulnerability with me.

"It's Echea," he said.

"I know," I said. That much was obvious. I had been thinking about her so much that she had worked her way into my dreams.

"No," he said. "It's nothing to be calm about." He sat up, kept his hand on me, and peered into my face. "First Susan, then you. It's like she's a poison that's infecting my family."

The moment of closeness shattered. I didn't pull away from him, but it took great control not to. "She's our child."

"No," he said. "She's someone else's child, and she's disrupting our household."

"*Babies* disrupt households. It took a while, but you accepted that."

"And if Echea had come to us as a baby, I would have accepted her. But she didn't. She has problems that we did not expect."

"The documents we signed said that we must treat those problems as our own."

His grip on my shoulder grew tighter. He probably didn't realize he was doing it. "They also said that the child had been inspected and was guaranteed illness free."

"You think some kind of illness is causing these dreams? That they're being passed from Echea to us like a virus?"

"Aren't they?" he asked. "Susan dreamed of a man who died. Someone whom she didn't want to go. Then 'they' pulled her away from him. You dream of your father's death—"

"They're different," I said. "Susan dreamed of a man's face exploding, and being captured. I dreamed of a man being shot, and of running away."

"But those are just details."

"*Dream* details," I said. "We've all been talking to Echea. I'm sure that some of her memories have woven their way into our dreams, just as our daily experiences do, or the vids we've seen. It's not that unusual."

"There were no night terrors in this household until she came," he said.

"And no one had gone through any trauma until she arrived, either." I pulled away from him now. "What we've gone through is small compared to her. Your parents' deaths, mine, the birth of the girls, a few bad investments, these things are all minor. We still live in the house you were born in. We swim in the lake of our childhood. We have grown wealthier. We have wonderful daughters. That's why we took Echea."

"To learn trauma?"

"No," I said. "Because we *could* take her, and so many others can't."

He ran a hand through his thinning hair. "But I don't want trauma in this house. I don't want to be disturbed any more. She's not our child. Let's let her become someone else's problem."

I sighed. "If we do that, we'll *still* have trauma. The government will sue. We'll have legal bills up to our eyeballs. We did sign documents covering these things."

"They said if the child was defective, we could send her back."

I shook my head. "And we signed even more documents that said she was fine. We waived that right."

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He bowed his head. Small strands of gray circled his crown. I had never noticed them before.

"I don't want her here," he said.

I put a hand on his. He had felt that way about Kally, early on. He had hated the way an infant disrupted our routine. He had hated the midnight feedings, had tried to get me to hire a wet nurse, and then a nanny. He had wanted someone else to raise our children because they inconvenienced him.

And yet the pregnancies had been his idea, just like Echea had been. He would get enthusiastic, and then when reality settled in, he would forget the initial impulse.

In the old days we had compromised. No wet nurse, but a nanny. His sleep undisturbed, but mine disrupted. My choice, not his. As the girls got older, he found his own ways to delight in them.

"You haven't spent any time with her," I said. "Get to know her. See what she's really like. She's a delightful child. You'll see."

He shook his head. "I don't want nightmares," he said, but I heard capitulation in his voice.

"I'll leave my interface on at night," I said. "We can even link when we sleep and manipulate each other's dreams."

He raised his head, smiling, suddenly looking boyish, like the man who proposed to me, all those years ago. "Like old times," he said.

I smiled back, irritation gone. "Just like old times," I said.

The nanny had offered to take Echea to Ronald's, but I insisted, even though the thought of seeing him so close to a comfortable intimacy with my husband made me uneasy. Ronald's main offices were over fifteen minutes away by shuttle. He was in a decade-old office park near the Mississippi, not too far from St. Paul's new capitol building. Ronald's building was all glass on the river side. It stood on stilts—the Mississippi had flooded abominably in '45, and the city still hadn't recovered from the shock—and to get to the main entrance, visitors needed a lift code. Ronald had given me one when I made the appointment.

Echea had been silent during the entire trip. The shuttle had terrified her, and it didn't take long to figure out why. Each time she had traveled by shuttle, she had gone to a new home. I reassured her that would not happen this time, but I could tell she thought I lied.

When she saw the building, she grabbed my hand.

"I'll be good," she whispered.

"You've been fine so far," I said, wishing my husband could see her now. For all his demonizing, he failed to realize she was just a little girl.

"Don't leave me here."

"I don't plan to," I said.

The lift was a small glass enclosure with voice controls. When I spoke the code, it rose on air jets to the fifth floor and docked, just like a shuttle. It was designed to work no matter what the weather, no matter what the conditions on the ground.

Echea was not amused. Her grip on my hand grew so tight that it cut off the circulation to my fingers.

We docked at the main entrance. The building's door was open, apparently on the theory that anyone who knew the code was invited. A secretary sat behind an antique wood desk that was dark and polished until it shone. He had a blotter in the center of the desk, a pen and inkwell beside it, and a single

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sheet of paper on top. I suspected that he did most of his work through his link, but the illusion worked. It made me feel as if I had slipped into a place wealthy enough to use paper, wealthy enough to waste wood on a desk.

"We're here to see Dr. Caro," I said as Echea and I entered.

"The end of the hall to your right," the secretary said, even though the directions were unnecessary. I had been that way dozens of times.

Echea hadn't, though. She moved through the building as if it were a wonder, never letting go of my hand. She seemed to remain convinced that I would leave her there, but her fear did not diminish her curiosity. Everything was strange. I suppose it had to be, compared to the Moon where space—with oxygen—was always at a premium. To waste so much area on an entrance wouldn't merely be a luxury there. It would be criminal.

We walked across the wood floors past several closed doors until we reached Ronald's offices. The secretary had warned someone because the doors swung open. Usually I had to use the small bell to the side, another old-fashioned affectation.

The interior of his offices was comfortable. They were done in blue, the color of calm he once told me, with thick easy chairs and pillowed couches. A children's area was off to the side, filled with blocks and soft toys and a few dolls. The bulk of Ronald's clients were toddlers, and the play area reflected that.

A young man in a blue worksuit appeared at one of the doors, and called my name. Echea clutched my hand tighter. He noticed her and smiled.

"Room B," he said.

I liked Room B. It was familiar. All three of my girls had done their post-interface work in Room B. I had only been in the other rooms once, and had felt less comfortable.

It was a good omen, to bring Echea to such a safe place.

I made my way down the hall, Echea in tow, without the man's guidance. The door to Room B was open. Ronald had not changed it. It still had the fainting couch, the work unit recessed into the wall, the reclining rockers. I had slept in one of those rockers as Kally had gone through her most rigorous testing.

I had been pregnant with Susan at the time.

I eased Echea inside and then pulled the door closed behind us. Ronald came through the back door—he must have been waiting for us—and Echea jumped. Her grip on my hand grew so tight that I thought she might break one of my fingers. I smiled at her and did not pull my hand away.

Ronald looked nice. He was too slim, as always, and his blond hair flopped against his brow. It needed a cut. He wore a silver silk shirt and matching pants, and even though they were a few years out of style, they looked sharp against his brown skin.

Ronald was good with children. He smiled at her first, and then took a stool and wheeled it toward us so that he would be at her eye level.

"Echea," he said. "Pretty name."

And a pretty child, he sent, just for me.

She said nothing. The sullen expression she had had when we met her had returned.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked.

"I don't want to go with you," she said.

"Where do you think I'm taking you?"

"Away from here. Away from—" she held up my hand, clasped in her small one. At that moment it became clear to me. She had no word for what we

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were to her. She didn't want to use the word "family," perhaps because she might lose us.

"Your mother—" he said slowly and as he did he sent *Right?* to me.

Right, I responded.

"—brought you here for a check-up. Have you seen a doctor since you've come to Earth?"

"At the center," she said.

"And was everything all right?"

"If it wasn't, they'd have sent me back."

He leaned his elbows on his knees, clasping his hands and placing them under his chin. His eyes, a silver that matched the suit, were soft.

"Are you afraid I'm going to find something?" he asked.

"No," she said.

"But you're afraid I'm going to send you back."

"Not everybody likes me," she said. "Not everybody wants me. They said, when they brought me to Earth, that the whole family had to like me, that I had to behave or I'd be sent back."

Is this true? he asked me.

I don't know. I was shocked. I had known nothing of this.

Does the family dislike her?

She's new. A disruption. That'll change.

He glanced at me over her head, but sent nothing else. His look was enough. He didn't believe they'd change, any more than Echea would.

"Have you behaved?" he asked softly.

She glanced at me. I nodded almost imperceptibly. She looked back at him. "I've tried," she said.

He touched her then, his long delicate fingers tucking a strand of her pale hair behind her ear. She leaned into his fingers as if she'd been longing for touch.

She's more like you, he told me, *than any of your own girls.*

I did not respond. Kally looked just like me, and Susan and Anne both favored me as well. There was nothing of me in Echea. Only a bond that had formed when I first saw her, all those weeks before.

Reassure her, he sent.

I have been.

Do it again.

"Echea," I said, and she started as if she had forgotten I was there. "Dr. Caro is telling you the truth. You're just here for an examination. No matter how it turns out, you'll still be coming home with me. Remember my promise?"

She nodded, eyes wide.

"I always keep my promises," I said.

Do you? Ronald asked. He was staring at me over Echea's shoulder.

I shivered, wondering what promise I had forgotten.

Always, I told him.

The edge of his lips turned up in a smile, but there was no mirth in it.

"Echea," he said. "It's my normal practice to work alone with my patient, but I'll bet you want your mother to stay."

She nodded. I could almost feel the desperation in the move.

"All right," he said. "You'll have to move to the couch."

He scooted his chair toward it.

"It's called a fainting couch," he said. "Do you know why?"

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She let go of my hand and stood. When he asked the question, she looked at me as if I would supply her with the answer. I shrugged.

"No," she whispered. She followed him hesitantly, not the little girl I knew around the house.

"Because almost two hundred years ago when these were fashionable, women fainted a lot."

"They did not," Echea said.

"Oh, but they did," Ronald said. "And do you know why?"

She shook her small head. With this idle chatter he had managed to ease her passage toward the couch.

"Because they wore undergarments so tight that they often couldn't breathe right. And if a person can't breathe right, she'll faint."

"That's silly."

"That's right," he said, as he patted the couch. "Ease yourself up there and see what it was like on one of those things."

I knew his fainting couch wasn't an antique. His had all sorts of diagnostic equipment built in. I wondered how many other people he had lured on it with his quaint stories.

Certainly not my daughters. They had known the answers to his questions before coming to the office.

"People do a lot of silly things," he said. "Even now. Did you know most people on Earth are linked?"

As he explained the net and its uses, I ignored them. I did some leftover business, made my daily chess move, and tuned into their conversation on occasion.

"—and what's really silly is that so many people refuse a link. It prevents them from functioning well in our society. From getting jobs, from communicating—"

Echea listened intently while she lay on the couch. And while he talked to her, I knew, he was examining her, seeing what parts of her brain responded to his questions.

"But doesn't it hurt?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Science makes such things easy. It's like touching a strand of hair."

And then I smiled. I understood why he had made the tender move earlier. So that he wouldn't alarm her when he put in the first chip, the beginning of her own link.

"What if it goes wrong?" she asked. "Will everybody—die?"

He pulled back from her. Probably not enough so that she would notice. But I did. There was a slight frown between his eyes. At first, I thought he would shrug off the question, but it took him too long to answer.

"No," he said as firmly as he could. "No one will die."

Then I realized what he was doing. He was dealing with a child's fear realistically. Sometimes I was too used to my husband's rather casual attitude toward the girls. And I was used to the girls themselves. They were much more placid than my Echea.

With the flick of a finger, he turned on the overhead light.

"Do you have dreams, honey?" he asked as casually as he could.

She looked down at her hands. They were slightly scarred from experiences I knew nothing about. I had planned to ask her about each scar as I gained her trust. So far, I had asked about none.

"Not any more," she said.

This time, I moved back slightly. Everyone dreamed, didn't they? Or were

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dreams only the product of a linked mind? That couldn't be right. I'd seen the babies dream before we brought them here.

"When was the last time you dreamed?" he asked.

She shoved herself back on the lounge. Its base squealed from the force of her contact. She looked around, seemingly terrified. Then she looked at me. It seemed like her eyes were appealing for help.

This was why I wanted a link for her. I wanted her to be able to tell me, without speaking, without Ronald knowing, what she needed. I didn't want to guess.

"It's all right," I said to her. "Dr. Caro won't hurt you."

She jutted out her chin, squeezed her eyes closed, as if she couldn't face him when she spoke, and took a deep breath. Ronald waited, breathless.

I thought, not for the first time, that it was a shame he did not have children of his own.

"They shut me off," she said.

"Who?" His voice held infinite patience.

Do you know what's going on? I sent him.

He did not respond. His full attention was on her.

"The Red Crescent," she said softly.

"The Red Cross," I said. "On the Moon. They were the ones in charge of the orphans—"

"Let Echea tell it," he said, and I stopped, flushing. He had never rebuked me before. At least, not verbally.

"Was it on the Moon?" he asked her.

"They wouldn't let me come otherwise."

"Has anyone touched it since?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly. Somewhere in their discussion, her eyes had opened. She was watching Ronald with that mixture of fear and longing that she had first used with me.

"May I see?" he asked.

She clapped a hand to the side of her head. "If it comes on, they'll make me leave."

"Did they tell you that?" he asked.

She shook her head again.

"Then there's nothing to worry about." He put a hand on her shoulder and eased her back on the lounge. I watched, back stiff. It seemed like I had missed a part of the conversation, but I knew I hadn't. They were discussing something I had never heard of, something the government had neglected to tell us. My stomach turned. This was exactly the kind of excuse my husband would use to get rid of her.

She was lying rigidly on the lounge. Ronald was smiling at her, talking softly, his hand on the lounge's controls. He got the read-outs directly through his link. Most everything in the office worked that way, with a back-up download on the office's equivalent of House. He would send us a file copy later. It was something my husband insisted on, since he did not like coming to these appointments. I doubted he read the files, but he might this time. With Echea.

Ronald's frown grew. "No more dreams?" he asked.

"No," Echea said again. She sounded terrified.

I could keep silent no longer. *Our family's had night terrors since she arrived,* I sent him.

He glanced at me, whether with irritation or speculation, I could not tell.

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They're similar, I sent. *The dreams are all about a death on the Moon. My husband thinks—*

I don't care what he thinks. Ronald's message was intended as harsh. I had never seen him like this before. At least, I didn't think so. A dim memory rose and fell, a sense memory. I had heard him use a harsh tone with me, but I could not remember when.

"Have you tried to link with her?" he asked me directly.

"How could I?" I asked. "She's not linked."

"Have your daughters?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Do you know if anyone's tried?" he asked her.

Echea shook her head.

"Has she been doing any computer work at all?" he asked.

"Listening to House," I said. "I insisted. I wanted to see if—"

"House," he said. "Your home system."

"Yes." Something was very wrong. I could feel it. It was in his tone, in his face, in his casual movements, designed to disguise his worry from his patients.

"Did House bother you?" he asked Echea.

"At first," she said. Then she glanced at me. Again, the need for reassurance. "But now I like it."

"Even though it's painful," he said.

"No, it's not," she said, but she averted her eyes from mine.

My mouth went dry. "It hurts you to use House?" I asked. "And you didn't say anything?"

She didn't want to risk losing the first home she ever had, Ronald sent. *Don't be so harsh.*

I wasn't the one being harsh. He was. And I didn't like it.

"It doesn't really hurt," she said.

Tell me what's happening, I sent him. *What's wrong with her?*

"Echea," he said, putting his hand alongside her head one more time. "I'd like to talk with your mother alone. Would it be all right if we sent you back to the play area?"

She shook her head.

"How about if we leave the door open? You'll always be able to see her."

She bit her lower lip.

Can't you tell me this way? I sent.

I need all the verbal tools, he sent back. *Trust me.*

I did trust him. And because I did, a fear had settled in the pit of my stomach.

"That's okay," she said. Then she looked at me. "Can I come back in when I want?"

"If it looks like we're done," I said.

"You won't leave me here," she said again. When would I gain her complete trust?

"Never," I said.

She stood then and walked out the door without looking back. She seemed so much like the little girl I'd first met that my heart went out to her. All that bravado the first day had been just that, a cover for sheer terror.

She went to the play area and sat on a cushioned block. She folded her hands in her lap, and stared at me. Ronald's assistant tried to interest her in a doll, but she shook him off.

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"What is it?" I asked.

Ronald sighed, and scooted his stool closer to me. He stopped near the edge of the lounge, not close enough to touch, but close enough that I could smell the scent of him mingled with his specially blended soap.

"The children being sent down from the Moon were rescued," he said softly.

"I know." I had read all the literature they sent when we first applied for Echea.

"No, you don't," he said. "They weren't just rescued from a miserable life like you and the other adoptive parents believe. They were rescued from a program that was started in Colony Europe about fifteen years ago. Most of the children involved died."

"Are you saying she has some horrible disease?"

"No," he said. "Hear me out. She has an implant—"

"A link?"

"No," he said. "Sarah, please."

Sarah. The name startled me. No one called me that any more. Ronald had not used it in all the years of our reacquaintance.

The name no longer felt like mine.

"Remember how devastating the Moon Wars were? They were using projectile weapons and shattering the colonies themselves, opening them to space. A single bomb would destroy generations of work. Then some of the colonists went underground—"

"And started attacking from there, yes, I know. But that was decades ago. What has that to do with Echea?"

"Colony London, Colony Europe, Colony Russia, and Colony New Delhi signed the peace treaty—"

"—vowing not to use any more destructive weapons. I remember this, Ronald—"

"Because if they did, no more supply ships would be sent."

I nodded. "Colony New York and Colony Armstrong refused to participate."

"And were eventually obliterated." Ronald leaned toward me, like he had done with Echea. I glanced at her. She was watching, as still as could be. "But the fighting didn't stop. Colonies used knives and secret assassins to kill government officials—"

"And they found a way to divert supply ships," I said.

He smiled sadly. "That's right," he said. "That's Echea."

He had come around to the topic of my child so quickly it made me dizzy.

"How could she divert supply ships?"

He rubbed his nose with his thumb and forefinger. Then he sighed again. "A scientist on Colony Europe developed a technology that broadcast thoughts through the subconscious. It was subtle, and it worked very well. A broadcast about hunger at Colony Europe would get a supply captain to divert his ship from Colony Russia and drop the supplies in Colony Europe. It's more sophisticated than I make it sound. The technology actually made the captain believe that the rerouting was his idea."

Dreams. Dreams came from the subconscious. I shivered.

"The problem was that the technology was inserted into the brain of the user, like a link, but if the user had an existing link, it superseded the new technology. So they installed it in children born on the Moon, born in Colony Europe. Apparently Echea was."

"And they rerouted supply ships?"

"By imagining themselves hungry—or actually being starved. They would

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broadcast messages to the supply ships. Sometimes they were about food. Sometimes they were about clothing. Sometimes they were about weapons." He shook his head. "Are. I should say are. They're still doing this."

"Can't it be stopped?"

He shook his head. "We're gathering data on it now. Echea is the third child I've seen with this condition. It's not enough to go to the World Congress yet. Everyone knows though. The Red Crescent and the Red Cross are alerted to this, and they remove children from the colonies, sometimes on penalty of death, to send them here where they will no longer be harmed. The technology is deactivated, and people like you adopt them and give them full lives."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Perhaps your House reactivated her device."

I shook my head. "The first dream happened before she listened to House."

"Then some other technology did. Perhaps the government didn't shut her off properly. It happens. The recommended procedure is to say nothing, and to simply remove the device."

I frowned at him. "Then why are you telling me this? Why didn't you just remove it?"

"Because you want her to be linked."

"Of course I do," I said. "You know that. You told her yourself the benefits of linking. You know what would happen to her if she isn't. You know."

"I know that she would be fine if you and your husband provided for her in your wills. If you gave her one of the houses and enough money to have servants for the rest of her life. She would be fine."

"But not productive."

"Maybe she doesn't need to be," he said.

It sounded so unlike the Ronald who had been treating my children that I frowned. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Her technology and the link are incompatible."

"I understand that," I said. "But you can remove her technology."

"Her brain formed around it. If I installed the link, it would wipe her mind clean."

"So?"

He swallowed so hard his Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "I'm not being clear," he said more to himself than to me. "It would make her a blank slate. Like a baby. She'd have to learn everything all over again. How to walk. How to eat. It would go quicker this time, but she wouldn't be a normal seven-year-old girl for half a year."

"I think that's worth the price of the link," I said.

"But that's not all," he said. "She'd lose all her memories. Every last one of them. Life on the Moon, arrival here, what she ate for breakfast the morning she received the link." He started to scoot forward and then stopped. "We *are* our memories, Sarah. She wouldn't be *Echea* any more."

"Are you so sure?" I asked. "After all, the basic template would be the same. Her genetic makeup wouldn't alter."

"I'm sure," he said. "Trust me. I've seen it."

"Can't you do a memory store? Back things up so that when she gets her link she'll have access to her life before?"

"Of course," he said. "But it's not the same. It's like being *told* about a boat ride as opposed to taking one yourself. You have the same basic knowledge, but the experience is no longer part of you."

His eyes were bright. Too bright.

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"Surely it's not that bad," I said.

"This is my specialty," he said, and his voice was shaking. He was obviously very passionate about this work. "I study how wiped minds and memory stores interact. I got into this profession hoping I could reverse the effects."

I hadn't known that. Or maybe I had and forgotten it.

"How different would she be?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "Considering the extent of her experience on the Moon, and the traumatic nature of much of it, I'd bet she'll be very different." He glanced into the play area. "She'd probably play with that doll beside her and not give a second thought to where you are."

"But that's good."

"That is, yes, but think how good it feels to earn her trust. She doesn't give it easily, and when she does, it's heartfelt."

I ran a hand through my hair. My stomach churned.

I don't like these choices, Ronald.

"I know," he said. I started. I hadn't realized I had actually sent him that last message.

"You're telling me that either I keep the same child and she can't function in our society, or I give her the same chances as everyone else and take away who she is."

"Yes," he said.

"I can't make that choice," I said. "My husband will see this as a breach of contract. He'll think that they sent us a defective child."

"Read the fine print in your agreement," Ronald said. "This one is covered. So are a few others. It's boilerplate. I'll bet your lawyer didn't even flinch when she read them."

"I can't make this choice," I said again.

He scooted forward and put his hands on mine. They were warm and strong and comfortable.

And familiar. Strangely familiar.

"You have to make the choice," he said. "At some point. That's part of your contract too. You're to provide for her, to prepare her for a life in the world. Either she gets a link or she gets an inheritance that someone else manages."

"And she won't even be able to check to see if she's being cheated."

"That's right," he said. "You'll have to provide for that too."

"It's not *fair,* Ronald!"

He closed his eyes, bowed his head, and leaned it against my forehead. "It never was," he said softly. "Dearest Sarah. It never was."

"Damn!" my husband said. We were sitting in our bedroom. It was half an hour before supper, and I had just told him about Echea's condition. "The lawyer was supposed to check for things like this!"

"Dr. Caro said they're just learning about the problem on Earth."

"Dr. Caro." My husband stood. "Dr. Caro is wrong."

I frowned at him. My husband was rarely this agitated.

"This is not a technology developed on the Moon," my husband said. "It's an Earth technology, pre-neural net. Subject to international ban in '24. The devices disappeared when the link became the common currency among all of us. He's right that they're incompatible."

I felt the muscles in my shoulders tighten. I wondered how my husband knew of the technology and wondered if I should ask. We never discussed each other's business.

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"You'd think that Dr. Caro would have known this," I said casually.

"His work is in current technology, not the history of technology," my husband said absently. He sat back down. "What a mess."

"It is that," I said softly. "We have a little girl to think of."

"Who's defective."

"Who has been *used*." I shuddered. I had cradled her the whole way back and she had let me. I had remembered what Ronald said, how precious it was to hold her when I knew how hard it was for her to reach out. How each touch was a victory, each moment of trust a celebration. "Think about it. Imagine using something that keys into your most basic desires, uses them for purposes other than—"

"Don't do that," he said.

"What?"

"Put a romantic spin on this. The child is defective. We shouldn't have to deal with that."

"She's not a durable good," I said. "She's a human being."

"How much money did we spend on in-the-womb enhancement so that Anne's substandard IQ was corrected? How much would we have spent if the other girls had had similar problems?"

"That's not the same thing," I said.

"Isn't it?" he asked. "We have a certain guarantee in this world. We are guaranteed excellent children, with the best advantages. If I wanted to shoot craps with my children's lives I would—"

"What would you do?" I snapped. "Go to the Moon?"

He stared at me as if he had never seen me before. "What does your precious Dr. Caro want you to do?"

"Leave Echea alone," I said.

My husband snorted. "So that she would be unlinked and dependent the rest of her life. A burden on the girls, a sieve for our wealth. Oh, but Ronald Caro would like that!"

"He didn't want her to lose her personality," I said. "He wanted her to remain *Echea*."

My husband stared at me for a moment, and the anger seemed to leave him. He had gone pale. He reached out to touch me, then withdrew his hand. For a moment, I thought that his eyes filled with tears.

I had never seen tears in his eyes before.

Had I?

"There is that," he said softly.

He turned away from me, and I wondered if I had imagined his reaction. He hadn't been close to Echea. Why would he care if her personality had changed?

"We can't think of the legalities any more," I said. "She's *ours*. We have to accept that. Just like we accepted the expense when we conceived Anne. We could have terminated the pregnancy. The cost would have been significantly less."

"We could have," he said as if the thought were unthinkable. People in our circle repaired their mistakes. They did not obliterate them.

"You wanted her at first," I said.

"Anne?" he asked.

"Echea. It was *our* idea, much as you want to say it was mine."

He bowed his head. After a moment, he ran his hands through his hair. "We can't make this decision alone," he said.

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He had capitulated. I didn't know whether to be thrilled or saddened. Now we could stop fighting about the legalities and get to the heart.

"She's too young to make this decision," I said. "You can't ask a child to make a choice like this."

"If she doesn't—"

"It won't matter," I said. "She'll never know. We won't tell her either way."

He shook his head. "She'll wonder why she's not linked, why she can only use parts of House. She'll wonder why she can't leave here without escort when the other girls will be able to."

"Or," I said, "she'll be linked and have no memory of this at all."

"And then she'll wonder why she can't remember her early years."

"She'll be able to remember them," I said. "Ronald assured me."

"Yes." My husband's smile was bitter. "Like she remembers a question on a history exam."

I had never seen him like this. I didn't know he had studied the history of neural development. I didn't know he had opinions about it.

"We can't make this decision," he said again.

I understood. I had said the same thing. "We can't ask a child to make a choice of this magnitude."

He raised his eyes to me. I had never noticed the fine lines around them, the matching lines around his nose and mouth. He was aging. We both were. We had been together a long, long time.

"She has lived through more than most on Earth ever do," he said. "She has lived through more than our daughters will, if we raise them right."

"That's not an excuse," I said. "You just want us to expiate our guilt."

"No," he said. "It's *her* life. She'll have to be the one to live it, not us."

"But she's our child, and that entails making choices for her," I said.

He sprawled flat on our bed. "You know what I'll chose," he said softly.

"Both choices will disturb the household," I said. "Either we live with her as she is—"

"Or we train her to be what we want." He put an arm over his eyes.

He was silent for a moment, and then he sighed. "Do you ever regret the choices *you* made?" he asked. "Marrying me, choosing this house over the other, deciding to remain where we grew up?"

"Having the girls," I said.

"Any of it. Do you regret it?"

He wasn't looking at me. It was as if he couldn't look at me, as if our whole lives rested on my answer.

I put my hand in the one he had dangling. His fingers closed over mine. His skin was cold.

"Of course not," I said. And then, because I was confused, because I was a bit scared of his unusual intensity, I asked, "Do you regret the choices you made?"

"No," he said. But his tone was so flat I wondered if he lied.

In the end, he didn't come with Echea and me to St. Paul. He couldn't face brain work, although I wished he had made an exception this time. Echea was more confident on this trip, more cheerful, and I watched her with a detachment I hadn't thought I was capable of.

It was as if she were already gone.

This was what parenting was all about: the difficult painful choices, the irreversible choices with no easy answers, the second-guessing of the future

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with no help at all from the past. I held her hand tightly this time while she wandered ahead of me down the hallway.

I was the one with fear.

Ronald greeted us at the door to his office. His smile, when he bestowed it on Echea, was sad.

He already knew our choice. I had made my husband contact him. I wanted that much participation from Echea's other parent.

Surprised? I sent.

He shook his head. *It is the choice your family always makes.*

He looked at me for a long moment, as if he expected a response, and when I said nothing, he crouched in front of Echea. "Your life will be different after today," he said.

"Momma—" and the word was a gift, a first, a never-to-be repeated blessing—"said it would be better."

"And mothers are always right," he said. He put a hand on her shoulder. "I have to take you from her this time."

"I know," Echea said brightly. "But you'll bring me back. It's a procedure."

"That's right," he said, looking at me over her head. "It's a procedure."

He waited just a moment, the silence deep between us. I think he meant for me to change my mind. But I did not. I could not.

It was for the best.

Then he nodded once, stood, and took Echea's hand. She gave it to him as willingly, as trustingly, as she had given it to me.

He led her into the back room.

At the doorway, she stopped and waved.

And I never saw her again.

Oh, we have a child living with us, and her name is Echea. She is a wonderful vibrant creature, as worthy of our love and our heritage as our natural daughters.

But she is not the child of my heart.

My husband likes her better now, and Ronald never mentions her. He has redoubled his efforts on his research.

He is making no progress.

And I'm not sure I want him to.

She is a happy, healthy child with a wonderful future.

We made the right choice.

It was for the best.

Echea's best.

My husband says she will grow into the perfect woman.

Like me, he says.

She'll be just like me.

She is such a vibrant child.

Why do I miss the wounded sullen girl who rarely smiled?

Why was she the child of my heart? ●

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egg horror poem

small
white
afraid of heights
whispering
in the cold, dark carton
to the rest of the dozen.
They are ten now.
Any meal is dangerous,
but they fear breakfast most.
They jostle in their compartments
trying for tiny, dark-veined cracks—
not enough to hurt much,
just anything to make them unattractive
to the big hands that reach in
from time to random time.
They tell horror stories
that their mothers,
the chickens,
clucked to them—
mermgues,
omelettes,
egg salad sandwiches,
that destroyer of dozens,
the homemade angel food cake.
The door opens.
Light filters into the carton,

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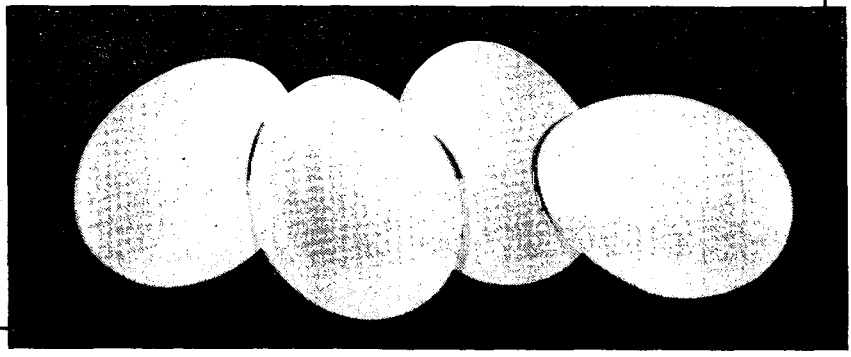
"Let it be the milk,"
they pray.
But the carton opens,
a hand reaches in—
once,
twice.
Before they can even jiggle,
they are alone again,
in the cold,
in the dark,
new spaces hollow
where the two were.
Through the heavy door
they hear the sound of the mixer,
deadly blades whirring.

They huddle,
the eight,
in the cold,
in the dark,
and wait.

—Laurel Winter



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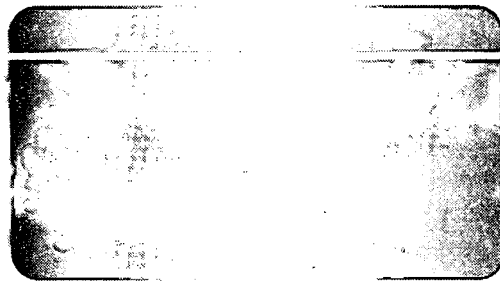
Kage Baker

THE LITERARY AGENT



Kage Baker tells us that "it is a matter of recorded fact that Robert Louis Stevenson did go off alone into the mountains above Monterey in 1879, where he fell ill and lay delirious for three days under an oak tree, before being found by hunters. Most literary scholars agree that he only blossomed as a writer of real promise after his recovery and return to England." Whether he encountered someone like Joseph while he lay ill, has not been recorded, but "having been born in Hollywood, I can vouch that there really are immortal creatures working for the movie studios."

Illustration by Shirley Chan

The object, had it been seen when it arrived, might have been described as a cheap aluminum trunk. In fact it was not a trunk, nor was it made of aluminum, and it was certainly not cheap. Nor was there anyone present who might have seen or attempted to describe it. So much for the sound of a tree falling in the forest.

Nevertheless the object *was* there, between one second and the next, soundless, spinning slowly and slower still until it wobbled to a gentle stop. For a moment after that nothing much happened. Clouds roiled past it, for it had arrived on the seaward face of a coastal mountain range. It sizzled faintly as moisture beaded on it. Underneath it, ferns and meadow grasses steadily flattened with its unrelieved weight.

Then the lid flew back and from the chest's interior a cloud of yellow gas boiled away. A man sat up inside, unfolding with some pain from his coiled fetal position. He exhaled a long jet of yellow smoke, which was whipped away at once by the driving mountain wind. Retching, he pulled himself free and tumbled over the side of the Object, sprawling at his length beside it.

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He lay perfectly still there a while and then sat up, alert, apparently fully recovered from his ordeal. He groped in his vest pocket and pulled out what appeared to be a watch. Actually it *was* a sort of a watch, certainly more so than the Object was a trunk. He consulted the timepiece and seemed satisfied, for he snapped it shut and got to his feet.

He appeared to be a man; actually he *was* a sort of man, though human men do not travel in trunks or breathe stasis gas. He was of compact build, stocky but muscular, olive-skinned. His eyes were hard as jet buttons. They had a cheerful expression, though, as he squinted into the wind and viewed the fog walling up the miles from the Bay of Monterey.

Leaning over into the Object he drew out the coat of his brown worsted suit, and slipped it on easily. He shot his cuffs, adjusted his tie, closed the lid of the Object that was not a trunk—but for the sake of convenience we'll call it a trunk from here on—and lifted it to his shoulders, which gave him some difficulty, for the thing had no handles and was as smooth as an ice cube.

Clutching it awkwardly, then, he set off across the meadow. His stride was meant to be purposeful. The date was September 8, 1879.

He followed a wagon road that climbed and wound. He clambered through dark groves of ancient redwoods, green and cold. He crossed bare mountainsides, wide open to the cloudy air, where rocks like ruins stood stained with lichen. None of this made much of an impression on him, though, because he wasn't a scenery man and the thing that we have agreed to call a trunk kept slipping from his shoulder.

Finally he set it down with what used to be called, in that gentler age, an oath.

"This is for the birds," he fumed.

The trunk made a clicking sound and from no visible orifice spewed out a long sheet of yellowed paper. He tore it off, read what was written there, and looked for a moment as though he wanted to crumple and fling it away. Instead he took a fountain pen from an inside coat pocket. Sitting on the smooth lid of the trunk he scribbled a set of figures on the paper and carefully fed it back into the slot that you could not have seen if you had been there.

When he had waited long enough to determine that no reply was forthcoming, he shouldered his burden again and kept climbing, quicker now because he knew he was near his destination. The road pushed up into a steadily narrowing canyon, and the way grew ever steeper and overhung with oak trees.

At last he saw the dark outline of a wagon in the gathering dusk, up ahead where the road ended. He made out the shape of a picketed horse grazing, he heard the sound of creek water trickling. A few swift paces brought him to his destination, where he set his burden down and looked at the figure he had traveled so far to see, sprawled under the tree by the coals of a dying fire. He snapped off a dry branch and poked up flames. He did not need them to see the object of his journey, but courtesy is important in any social encounter.

The fire glittered in the eyes of the man who lay there, wide-set eyes that stared unseeing into the branches above him. A young man with a long doleful face, shabbily dressed, he lay with neither coat nor blanket in a drift of prickly oak leaves. He had yet to write *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* or *Treasure Island,* and from the look of him it was unlikely he'd live long enough to do so.

The other scanned him and shook his head disapprovingly. Malnutrition,

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tubercular lesions, malaria, a hideous case of eczema on both hands. "Tsk tsk tsk." He drew a little case from his pocket. Something he sprayed on the scabbed hands, something he injected into one wrist. He peeled the back from a transdermal patch and stuck it just behind the young man's ear.

Then he turned his attention to the fire again. He built it up to a good blaze, filled the tin kettle at the creek and set more water to boil. It had not yet begun to steam when the young man twitched violently and rose up on his elbows. He stared at his visitor, who put his hands on his trouser-knees and leaned over him with a benevolent smile.

"Robert Louis Stevenson! How's it going?"

"Whae the Hell are you?" croaked he.

"Allow me to introduce myself: Joseph X. Machina." He grabbed Stevenson's limp hand and shook it heartily. "At your service, even if I am just a hallucination. Would you like some tea? It's about ready."

The young man did not reply, but stared at him with eyes of extraordinary size and luminosity. His visitor, meanwhile, rummaged amid his belongings in the back of the wagon.

"Say, you didn't pack any tea. But then you didn't really come up here to camp, did you? You ought to do something about that death wish of yours." He found a tin cup and carried it back to the fire. "Luckily, I always carry a supply with me." He sat down and from an inner pocket produced a teabag.

"What's that?" inquired Stevenson.

"Orange Pekoe, I think." The other peered at the tag. "Yeah. Now, here's your tea, and let's make you nice and comfortable—" He found Stevenson's coat, made a pillow of it and propped up his head. "There we are."

He resumed his seat on the trunk and drew from the same inner pocket a bar of chocolate in silver foil. He unwrapped one end of it and took a bite.

"Now, Mr. Stevenson, I have a proposition for you," he said. Stevenson, who had been watching him in increasing fascination, began to laugh giddily.

"It seems I'm a popular man tonight," he gasped. "Is the trunk to carry off my soul? Is the Accuser of the Brethren different in California? I'd have wagered you'd look more like a Spanish Grandee in these parts. Do you change your coat with the times? Of course you would, wouldn't you? Yet you haven't quite the look of a Yankee. In any case, *Retro, Sathanas!*"

"No, no, no, don't worry. I'm not that guy. I'm merely a pleasant dream you're having. Here, have some of this." He broke off and handed a square of chocolate to Stevenson, who accepted it with a smirk.

"Sweeties from Hell!" The idea sent him into a giggling fit that started him coughing. The other watched him closely. When he recovered he pulled himself up on his elbow and said, "Well then—you haven't any cigarettes, I suppose."

"Sorry, I don't smoke."

"Lucifer not smoke?!" This time he laughed until he wept, wiping his eyes on his frayed sleeves. Consumptives do not wipe their eyes on their handkerchiefs. "Oh, I hope I remember this when I wake. What an idea for a comic narrative."

"Actually that was sort of what I wanted to talk to you about," Joseph went on imperturbably, finishing the last of his chocolate in a bite.

"Is that so?" Stevenson lurched into a sitting position. He grasped the cup of tea in his trembling hands, warming them.

"Absolutely. Remember, this is all part of a dream. And what is your dream, Louis, your most cherished dream? To make a success of this writing

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business, isn't it? Financial independence so you can win this American lady you've come mooning after. Well, in this dream you're having right now, you've met a man from the Future—that's me—and I've come back through time to tell you that you've *got* it, baby. All you wanted. Everything. Mrs. Osbourne too."

"What nonsense. I'm dying penniless, unknown, and (I fear) unloved." Stevenson's eyes grew moist. "I came such a long way to do it, too. She sent me away! What does *she* care if I expire in this wilderness?"

"Louis, Louis, work with me, all right?" Joseph leaned forward, looking earnest. "*This is your dream.* This dream says you're going to become a famous author. You write slam-bang adventure stories."

"I write abominably derivative fiction. The only good stuff's from life, my essays and the travel books."

"Come on, Louis, let's make this bird fly. You'll write adventure novels about the sea and historical times. People love them. You're a hit. You're bigger than Sir Walter Scott, all right?"

"*He* couldn't write a lucid sentence if his life had depended on it," Stevenson sneered. "Oh, this is all the rankest self-conceit anyway."

"Then what will it hurt you to listen? Now. I represent the Chronos Photo-Play Company. Let me explain what a photo-play is. We have patented a method of, uh, making magic-lantern pictures into a sort of effect of moving tableaux, if you can grasp that. Maybe you've read about the cinematograph? Oh, gee, no, you haven't." Joseph consulted his timepiece. "You'll just miss it. Never mind— So, in the Future, we have these exhibitions of our photo-plays and people pay admission to come in and watch them, the way they'd watch a real live play or an opera, with famous players and everything. But since we don't have to pay live actors or even move scenery, the profit margin for the exhibitor is enormous. See?"

Stevenson gaped at him a moment before responding. "I was wrong. I apologize. You may or may not be the Devil, but you're most assuredly a Yankee."

"No, no, I'm a dream. Anyway. People are crazy about these photo-plays, they'll watch anything we shoot. We've adapted all the great works of literature already. Shakespeare, Dickens, all those guys. So now, my masters are looking for new material, and since you're *such* a famous and successful writer they sent me to ask if you'd be interested in a job."

"I see." Stevenson leaned back, stretching out his long legs and crossing them. "Your masters want to adapt one of my wonderful adventure stories for these photo-plays of theirs?"

"Uh, actually, we've already done everything you wrote. Several times."

"I should damned well hope I got royalties, then!"

"Oh, sure, Louis, sure you did. You're not only famous, you're rich. Anyway what my masters had in mind was you coming up with something completely *new*. Never-before-seen. Just like all your other stuff, you know, with that wonderful Robert Louis Stevenson magic, but different. Exclusively under contract for them."

"You mean they want me to write a play?" Stevenson looked intrigued.

"Not exactly. We don't have the time. This dream isn't going to last long enough for you to do that, because it's a matter of historical record that you're only going to lie here another—" Joseph consulted his timepiece again, "—forty-three hours before you're found and nursed back to health. No, see, all they need you to do is develop a story *treatment* for them. Four or five pages, a plot, characters. You don't have to do the dialogue; we'll fill that out as we

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film. We can claim it's from long-lost notes found in a locked desk you used to own, or something."

"This is madness." Stevenson sipped his tea experimentally.

"Delirium. But what have you got to lose? All you have to do is come up with a concept and develop it. You don't even have to write it down. I'll do that for you. And to tell you the honest truth—" Joseph leaned down confidentially, "—this is a specially commissioned work. There's this wealthy admirer of yours in the place I come from, and he's willing to pay anything to see a *new* Robert Louis Stevenson picture."

"Wouldn't he pay more for a whole novel? I could make one up as we go along and dictate the whole thing to you, if we've got two more days here. You'd be surprised at how quickly stories unfold when the Muse is with me." Stevenson squinted thoughtfully up at the stars through the branches of the oak tree.

Joseph looked slightly embarrassed. "He's . . . not really much of a reader, Louis. But he loves our pictures, and he's rich."

"You stand to make a tidy sum out of this, then."

"Perceptive man, Mr. Stevenson."

Stevenson's eyes danced. "And you'll pay me millions of money, no doubt."

"You can name your price. Money is no object."

"Dollars, pounds, or faery gold?" Stevenson began to chuckle and Joseph chuckled right along with him in a companionable manner.

"You've got the picture, Louis. It's a dream, remember? Maybe I've got a trunkful of gold doubloons here, or pieces of eight. I'm authorized to pay you *anything* for an original story idea."

"Very well then." Stevenson gulped the tea down and flung the cup away. "I want a cigarette."

The other man's chuckle stopped short.

"You want a cigarette?"

"I do, sir."

"You want— Jeepers, Louis, I haven't got any cigarettes!"

"How now? No cigarettes? This is my dream and I can have anything I want. No cigarette, no story." Stevenson laced his slender fingers together and smiled.

"Look, Louis, there's something you should know." Joseph bent forward seriously. "Cigarettes are not really good for your lungs. Trust me. They'll make your cough worse, honest. Now, look, I've got gold certificates here for you."

"It's cigarettes or nothing, I say."

"But I tell you I can't *get* any—" The other seized the hair at his temples and pulled in vexation. Then he halted, as if listening to an inner voice. "Hell, what can I lose?"

He opened the lid of the trunk and brought out his pad of yellow lined paper. Casting a reproachful glance at Stevenson he scribbled something down and fed his message into the invisible slot. Almost immediately the reply emerged. He scanned it, wrote something more and fed it back. Another quick reply. Stevenson watched all this with amusement.

"He's got a wee devil in the box poking his letters back out," he speculated.

"All I want is to make the man happy," Joseph retorted. "Fame, I offer him. Riches, too. What does he do? He turns capricious on me. Lousy mortal." He read the next communication and his eyes narrowed. Hastily he backed away from the trunk, putting a good eight feet between himself and it.

"What's amiss now?" inquired Stevenson. "Old Nick's in a temper, doubtless."

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"I'd cover my ears if I were you," replied the other through gritted teeth. As if on cue the trunk gave a horrific screech. It shook violently; there was a plume of foul smoke; there was one last convulsive shudder: then a cigarette dropped from the orifice, very much the worse for wear, mashed flat and in fact on fire.

Joseph ran forward and snatched it up. He blew out the flame and handed the smoldering mess to Stevenson.

"There," he snapped. "It's even lit for you. Satisfied?"

Stevenson just stared at it, dumfounded.

"Smoke the damned thing!" thundered the other. Stevenson took a hasty drag while Joseph bent over the trunk and did some diagnostic procedures.

"Did we break Hell's Own Postbox?" ventured Stevenson after a moment.

"I hope not," the other man snarled. "And I hope you're doing some thinking about story ideas."

"Right." Stevenson inhaled again. The cigarette did not draw well. He eyed it critically but thought it best not to complain. "Right, then. What sort of story shall we give them? A romance, I dare say."

"Sex is always popular," conceded Joseph. He stood, brushed off his knees and took up the yellow lined pad. "Go on."

"Right. There's a woman. She's a beauty, but she labors under some kind of difficulty. Perhaps there's a family curse, but *she's* pure as the snows of yesteryear. And there's a fellow to rescue her, a perfect gentle knight as it were, but he's knocked about the world a bit. Not a hapless boy at any rate. And there's an older fellow, a bad 'un, a dissolute rake. Byronic."

"Not very original, if you'll pardon my saying so," remarked Joseph, though he did not stop writing.

"No, I suppose not. How many ways are there to write a romance? Let's make it a woman who's the bad 'un. Tries to lure the hero from the heroine. There's a thought! A sorceress. Metaphorically speaking. Perhaps even in fact. Wouldn't that be interesting?"

"Sounding good." The other man nodded as he wrote. "Where's all this happening, Louis?"

"France. Medieval France."

"So this is a costume drama."

"A what? Oh. Yes, silks and velvets and whitest samite. Chain mail and miniver. And the sea, I'm sure, with a ship standing off the coast signaling mysteriously. To the beauteous wicked dame, who's a spy! Build this around some historical incident. Put the Black Prince in it. Maybe she's a spy for him and the hero's a Frenchman. No, no, no—the British public won't take that. On the other hand, this is for the Yankees, isn't it?"

"Sounding good, Louis, sounding really good." The other tore off his written sheet with a flourish. "Let's just feed it into the moviola and see what winds up on the cutting-room floor."

"I'm sure that means something to you, but I'm damned if I know what," remarked Stevenson, watching as the sheet was pulled into the trunk. "How does it do that?"

Joseph did not answer, because the sheet came spewing back at once. He pulled it forth and studied it, frowning.

"What's wrong? Don't they like it?"

"Oh, er, they're crazy about it, Louis. It's swell. They just have a few suggestions. A few changes they want made."

"They want something rewritten?"

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"Uh . . . the Middle Ages is out. France is out. Knights in armor stuff is expensive to shoot. They want to know if you can make it the South Seas. Give it some of that wonderful tropical ambiance you do so well."

"I've never been in the South Seas," said Stevenson coldly. He remembered his cigarette and puffed at it.

"No, not yet, but that's all right. You can fake it. California's almost tropical, isn't it? Hot, anyway. Parts of it. That's the Pacific Ocean out there, right? Just write some palm trees into the scenery. Now, er, they want you to drop the girl and the guy. There's just no audience for pure sweethearts now. But they think the evil lady is fabulous. They think the story should mostly revolve around her. Lots of costume changes and bedroom scenes. She plays for power at the court of this Dark Lord guy. Black Prince, I mean."

"The Black Prince never went to the South Seas either, you know. He was a medieval Plantagenet."

"Whatever. I'm afraid the distinction is lost on them, Louis." Joseph gave a peculiar embarrassed shrug. "Historical accuracy is not a big issue here. If we're going to make it the South Seas he has to be something else anyway. Maybe some kind of witch doctor in a black helmet or something. They just liked the name, Black Prince, it's got a kind of ring to it."

"They sound like a supremely ignorant lot. Why don't they write their own bloody story?" Stevenson muttered. His airy humor was descending fast.

"Now, Louis, don't take it that way. They really love your stuff. They just need to tailor it to their audience a little, that's all."

"South Seas be damned." Stevenson leaned back. "Why shouldn't I write about what I know? If France isn't good enough for them, what about this country? I saw some grand scenery from the railway carriage. Now, wait! What about a true American romance? This has possibilities. Do you know, I saw a man threaten to shoot a railway conductor dead, just because he'd been put off the coach for being drunk and disorderly? Only in America. It's as good as the Montagues and Capulets, only with revolvers instead of rapiers. Prairies instead of pomegranate gardens. Picturesque barbarism. What about a hero who's kidnapped at birth and raised by Red Indians?"

"Well, it's been done, but okay." The other began to write again.

"And there's some additional obscurity to his birth . . . he's the son of a Scots lord."

"Gee, Louis, I don't know . . ."

"And his younger brother succeeds to the title but emigrates to America, fleeing punishment for a crime he did not commit. Or perhaps he did. More interesting character. Or perhaps—"

"Is there any sex in this?"

"If you like. The brothers fall in love with the same woman, will that suit you? In fact . . . the girl is the betrothed of the brother who emigrates. She follows him devotedly. While searching for him, she's kidnapped by the Red Indian band of whom her fiancé's brother is now chief. *He* falls in love with her. Claims her as his bride. Forced marriage takes place. She's terrified, but compelled by the mating rituals of man in his primal innocence."

"Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, Louis!"

"Let's see them get *that* past the scribes and Pharisees of popular taste," sneered Stevenson, and tossed the last fragment of his cigarette into the fire. "Meanwhile, the fugitive brother has become a frontiersman, with buckskin clothes, long rifle, and quaint fur cap. Gets word that his betrothed has gone

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missing. Goes in search of her (he's become an expert tracker too) and finds unmistakable evidence of her singular fate. Swears an oath of vengeance, goes out after the brave who committed the enormity, vows to eat his heart, all unwitting they're really brothers."

"We've got a smash hit here, Louis."

"You can cobble on some sort of blood-and-thunder ending. True identities revealed all 'round. Perhaps the Red Indian brother has a distinctive and prominent birthmark. Fugitive brother becomes a heroic guide leading settlers across the plains. Red Indian brother accepts his true identity as a white man but refuses to return to Great Britain, denounces the irrelevancy of the British aristocracy, runs for Congress instead. What about another cigarette?"

"Not a chance in Hell," Joseph replied, politely enough nevertheless. He ripped out the page he had been scribbling on and fed it into the trunk. "But how's about a cocktail?" He produced a flask and offered it to Stevenson. "French brandy? You like this. It's a matter of record."

"Great God, man." Stevenson extended his long hand, just as the yellow sheet came curling back out of the trunk. It was covered with dense commentary in violet ink. Both men frowned at it.

"You drink," Joseph told him. "I'll see what they say."

"I can tell you what they don't like, old chap." Stevenson took a long pull from the flask. "Ah. The plot's derivative and wildly improbable. How's the hero to get kidnapped by Red Indians in Scotland, for Christ's sake? Disgruntled family retainer makes away with the wee babby and sends it off down the Clyde in a Moses basket, which by some inexplicable chance washes up in the Gulf of Mexico a day later?"

"Actually they don't have a problem with that part." The other man read swiftly. "But the Wild West business tends to bomb big time. The frontiersman doesn't work for them, either. He can't have a rifle because that would mean he shoots wild animals, see, which is marketing death, protests and threats against distributors, bad box office. They like the sex stuff, though. They just want to know if you can make it the South Seas where all this happens."

Very slowly, Stevenson had another swallow of brandy.

"Why don't your masters send you round to that Herman Melville chap?" he inquired with an edge in his voice. "He wrote some jolly seagoing palaver, didn't he? Why isn't *he* having this dream?"

"Too hard to film his books," responded Joseph. "But, Louis baby, listen to yourself. You're arguing with a hallucination. Isn't that silly? Now, would it really be so hard, changing the plot around a little? That whole primitive mating ritual bit would play just as well in Tahiti, you know. You could even put in—" he looked cautiously around, as though someone might be listening, "—pirates."

"Buccaneers and native women? Who do you propose is going to come see these photo-plays of yours? Not the bourgeois citizens of Edinburgh, I can tell you."

"Well, it doesn't have to be pornographic. Just, you know, racy. Mildly prurient. Nothing criminal. Say your pirate's a fine upstanding young fellow who just happened to get press-ganged."

"Men were press-ganged into the Navy, not into pirate crews," said Stevenson in disgust. "I grow weary of this dream. Why don't you clear off and let the other beasties come back? I'd rather blue devils than this."

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"But I'm not a nightmare! I'm a *good* dream, honest. Anyway, I can't go. I've been assigned to stay with you until I get a usable concept."

"Then I'll leave you." Stevenson struggled to his feet. He gasped for breath and with a determined stride moved out from the fire into darkness; but his legs seemed to curl under him, impossible thin long inhuman legs, and he fell. The other man was beside him at once, leading him back to the fire solicitously.

"Hey, hey, hey, Louis, let's take it easy. I'm here to help you, remember?"

"It's the damned fog." Stevenson was trembling. "I cannot get away from it. Damned wet air. Mountains aren't high enough."

"Gee, that's awful." Joseph settled him down by the fire, put the folded coat back in place under his head, poured another cup of tea. "Maybe you should travel more. Now, you could go to the—"

"South Seas, yes, I'd guessed you were going to say that," Stevenson groaned. "Look here, what about a compromise? The story takes place on a ship traveling in the South Seas. I've been on ships. I can write about them. Your hero is a strapping young Kanaka who's been carried off by whites."

"A Hawaiian? That's an interesting angle." The other was writing again. "Why'd they kidnap him?"

"They needed crewmen. Theirs died of scurvy, I dare say."

"Shanghaied!" exclaimed Joseph with gusto. "*Love* the title. Go on, Louis, go on."

"He's carried off on a whaling ship, away from his island home and his aged parents. He's a heathen (this is before the missionaries) but nevertheless naturally virtuous. The drunken behavior of the white sailors fills him with righteous dismay."

"We can show a lot of sleaze here. I like it."

"His ship comes to the rescue of another ship under attack by pirates. Buccaneers have just boarded the other vessel and are in the act of putting passengers to the sword. Among passengers a beautiful young virtuous Scottish girl, no doubt traveling with her minister father. Probably has money too. Our Kanaka performs particularly daring act of rescue of maiden. She falls in love with him, he with her."

"Okay, okay, and?"

"They take him back to Scotland with them and . . . stop a bit!" Stevenson's eyes lit up. "It's not just one girl he rescues from pirates, it's *two!* Minister's daughter and a harlot who for some reason's been traveling in the South Seas. Both fall in love with him!"

"Boy oh boy oh boy." The other man fed his notes into the trunk. It spat them back again. He read the commentary. Stevenson, watching his face, gave a sob of exasperation and lay back.

"*Now* what's wrong with it?"

"They didn't go for the title. Funny. And they don't want the hero to be a real Hawaiian. They like the other idea about him being a long-lost duke or earl or somebody like that. Like, his parents were English and their yacht got shipwrecked when he was a baby or something? And he just looks brown because of the tropical sun? Not really some native guy at all."

"Bigots," said Stevenson with contempt.

"No, no, no, guy, you have to understand. Look, you write for the magazines, Louis, you know the popular taste. They want sex, they want violence, but they want the hero to be a white guy. Preferably an English peer. Brown guys can't be heroes. You *know* that."

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"They're heroes in their own stories."

"Oh, yeah? What about the Musketeers guy, Dumas, he was a quadroon or something, right? Who's in his books? French kings and counts. Black, white, it's only a metaphor anyway. Believe me, our audience wants rich white guys as heroes."

"Well, I despise your audience."

"No, you don't. You need money as much as anybody else. You know the stuff you can't write about. You know where you're free to put in those really interesting bits in a way readers won't mind. Villains! It's the villains everyone secretly loves, Louis. They can be lowborn, they can be strange, they can do rotten things and it's okay because that's what the audience wants. And why? *Because people are lowborn and strange and rotten, Louis!* They want the hero to be this impossible perfect white guy so they can watch the villain beat the crap out of him, since it's what they'd like to do themselves. As long as the villain loses in the end, they don't have to feel guilty about it. And it's all phony anyway. I mean, have you ever really talked to a member of the House of Lords? What a bunch of pinheads."

"I see your point, but I can't agree. The human condition is evil, but we *must* strive to be otherwise. A writer can't glorify evil in his work. He can't write of the miserable *Status Quo* of human life as though it were a fine and natural state. He must morally instruct, he must inspire, he must hold up an ideal to be worked for—"

"Oh, garbage. You don't believe that yourself, even. That's why you wrote—" Joseph halted himself with an effort. "Well, look. Given that a writer has this other fine noble purpose in life, he's still got to eat, okay? So there's no harm in a nice swashbuckling adventure yarn with a swell dark villain—Byronic, like you said—and a little thin white cardboard hero to bounce off him. It sells, Louis, and there's no point denying it. So. About this Dark Lord guy."

"This is really too depressing." Stevenson gazed into the fire. "I've never seen the pattern in this sort of thing. But it *is* what we do, isn't it? We feed a perverse urge in our readers by creating supremely interesting images of evil. Perhaps we even cultivate that urge. The villain wins sympathy in our hearts through the skill of the writer. I've felt admiration for the rogue of the old romance myself, the man with the hand of the devil on his shoulder. Great God, what are we doing when we create such characters? *And yet they make the story live.*"

"Now, now, buck up. Look. Suppose you've got your hero sailing along with his two ladies, one good, one bad. Nice tension there. Suppose, Louis, he's got a Bad Guy chasing him, say the chief of the pirates, only this guy isn't just a pirate, he's *the* Pirate of Pirates, powerful, intelligent, interesting—maybe he's some kind of magician, picked it up in the islands—maybe he has something weird about his appearance, in a fascinating way. Huh? Huh, Louis?"

"You even intrigue me with it." Stevenson turned listless eyes on him. "You persuade. You seduce. I want to take pen in hand and write the awful thing and gain immortal fame thereby. Oh, God, this is the real temptation."

"Ah, come on, Louis. We're not talking about sin, we're talking about Dramatic Conflict."

"What if Dramatic Conflict *were* a sin?" Stevenson said in a small frightened voice, looking back at the flames. "What if my old nurse were right and storytelling does imperil men's souls? Because we do pander to their worst instincts. We do. Let me make my hero as brown as I will, he'll still be the in-

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nocent, the Fool. He'll still inspire contempt by his virtue. All my art is spent on making my *villain* fascinate and charm."

"Hey, look, Louis, don't get sore. I don't dictate public taste, I just try to accommodate it. People live such sad lives. Why not take their minds off the fact by entertaining them?"

"And this is to be my choice, isn't it? I can die an unknown scribbler of essays or I can write the kind of thing you want for your photo-plays and live a successful and famous man." Stevenson shut his eyes tightly. "Well, you can get straight back to Hell with your infernal trunk. I won't sell my soul for eternal fame and you can tell your master so from me. Thee and all thy works I utterly reject."

"Believe me, Louis, you're taking this all the wrong way," the other said soothingly, getting down on his knees beside him. "Isn't it possible to use people's appetites to instruct them in a, uh, positive moral way? Sell 'em tickets to the Palace of Excess and then slip 'em out the back to Wisdom by putting up a sign that says *This Way to the Egress?* Sure it is. Sure you can. You will. Dickens did it all the time. And even if there *is* something wrong with the entertainment business, can't you atone for what you do? You can use your loot to do something good. Fight injustice. Defend the brown guys oppressed by white guys, maybe. Louis, you can use this talent of yours to do such good."

"This is just the way you'd have to talk to convince me." Stevenson was trembling, clenching his poor scabbed hands. "Fiendish. Fiendish. Can't you let me die in peace?" The other looked at him with something like compassion. He leaned forward and said:

"Has it occurred to you that you might be wrestling with an angel, Louis?" Stevenson opened his eyes again and stared at him, sweat beading on his high brow. "Come on now. We've almost got it right. Tell me why the pirate is chasing after our hero. Is he after a treasure map? Is *he* in love with one of the girls? Are they rivals from childhood? *Tell me the story, Louis."*

Stevenson's breathing had grown steadily harsher. "Very well," he began, covering his face with his long hands and staring up through his fingers at the stars, "your damned pirate's the man for me. Perhaps he's got a cloak that blows about him as he makes his entrance in a storm, black as shadows dancing on the wall of the night-nursery, black as devil's wings. And if you're good, and lie very still, he can't see you . . . why can't he see you? Evil's not blind, no, Evil walks in the sun with a bland and reasonable face." He lowered his hands and glared at Joseph. "But there's some horror to him as he searches for you there in the dark. *You can hear him coming.* He's a limping devil, you can hear his halting step—or his wooden leg! The man is maimed, that's it, he's had a leg clean gone by a round broadside of twenty-pound shot!" He sat up in excitement, taken with his creation.

"And that's the mark by which you may know him, for you couldn't *tell*, else, he looks so big and bluff and brave, like somebody's father come to chase the night horrors away. There's your subtle evil, man, there's the Pirate as honest seaman in plain broadcloth, a man full of virtues to win your trust—until he finds it convenient to kill you. Yes! And the damnable thing is, he'll *have* those virtues! Not a mask, d'you see? He'll *be* brave, and clever, and decent enough in his way—for all his murderous resolution—oh, this is the man, *ecce homo*, look at him there large as life! Dear God, he's standing there beside you even now, leaning on his crutch, and there's the parrot on his shoulder—"

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He threw out his frail arm, pointing with such feverish conviction that Joseph, who had been sitting spellbound in spite of himself, turned involuntarily to look. Louis' voice rose to a hoarse scream:

"Oh, give me paper! Give me even a scrap of that yellow paper, please, you can have the bloody soul, only let me get this down before he slips away from me—" and he groped at his pockets, searching for a pencil; but then he went into a coughing fit that sprayed blood across the other man's trousers. Aghast, Joseph pulled out a tiny device and forced it between Stevenson's teeth.

"Bite! Bite on this and inhale!" Stevenson obeyed and clung to him, strangling, as the other fumbled out another needle and managed to inject another drug.

"Jeez, this wasn't due to happen yet! I'm really sorry, Mr. Stevenson, really, just keep breathing, keep breathing. Okay? You'll be okay now. I promise. This'll fix you up just fine."

After a moment Stevenson fell back, limp. His coughing had stopped. His breathing slowed. Joseph had produced a sponge and a bottle of some kind of cleaner from the trunk and was hastily dabbing blood from his trousers.

"See what you made me do?" Stevenson smiled feebly. "Blood-red ensign's hoisted at last. Disgusting, isn't it?"

"Hey, you'll be okay. What I gave you ought to keep it off for months. You won't even remember this." He finished with his clothes and went to work on Stevenson's. "Besides, I've seen worse."

"I dare say you have." Stevenson giggled again. "My apologies for the blood. But it's a sort of a metaphor, isn't it? And now you've foxed your own design, for I'll die and he'll never live, my limping devil . . . though he'd have been a grand piece of work . . ."

"Oh, you'll live long enough to write about *him*." Joseph peered critically at his cleaning job and decided he'd gotten everything out. "Not that it'll do my masters any damn good."

Stevenson closed his eyes. Joseph gave a final swab at his shirtfront. As he was doing so the trunk made a chattering noise and spewed out another sheet of paper. Almost absently he reached out to tear it loose, and glanced at the reply:

CLIENT SAW "NOTES" ON KNIGHTS IN ARMOR STORY, LOVES IT. *DE GUSTIBUS NON EST DISPUTANDEM.* SOME ADAPTATION POSSIBLE. SECURE RIGHTS ON FORGERY BELOW AND PROCEED TO NEXT ARTIST.

Stevenson had opened his eyes again at the sound the trunk made. Joseph looked up from his communication and met his gaze with a frank smile.

"Well, Louis, you've won. Your soul has been tested and found pure. You're one of the Elect, okay? Congratulations, and let me just ask you one last favor."

"What's that?" Stevenson was groggy now.

"Can I have your autograph? Just sign here." He put the pen in Stevenson's hand and watched as Stevenson scrawled his name on the paper, just below the cleverly faked holograph of plot outline and character notes.

"Thanks, pal. I mean that. Sincerely." The other fed the paper into the trunk and this time it did not return. He stood and hoisted the trunk up to his shoulder.

"I'll be running along now, Louis, but before I do I'd like to give you a piece of advice. You won't take it, but I feel compelled. That's just the kind of guy I am."

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Stevenson peered at him. Joseph leaned down.

"You really would live longer if you'd give up the cigarettes."

"Tempter, get thee below," Stevenson croaked.

"Funny you should say that, you know, because that *is* where I'm based. In a geographical sense only, of course, Down and South being sort of the same? Little suburb just outside of Los Angeles. We produce our photo-plays down there. It's not a great town for writers, Louis. I know you like to travel and everything, but you'd want to leave this one off your world itinerary. Believe me, it's not a place for a man with your scruples to work. The climate's good, though, and they really like your stuff, so it might have suited you. Who knows?"

"I'll die first." Stevenson closed his eyes. The other man nodded somberly and walked away into the night.

In entirely another time and place, there was a whirl and scatter of brown beech leaves and the trunk was *there*, spinning unsteadily to a halt; and as there had been no witness to observe its previous arrival, there was no witness now to notice that it was spinning in the opposite direction. It slowed and stopped, and the winter silence of an English forest settled over it. When the lid popped the trunk fell over, and the man in the brown suit had to push the lid aside as he crawled out on hands and knees through a small cloud of yellow smoke.

He crouched on the forest floor a moment or two, panting out stasis gas. As he got to his feet and brushed off his clothes he heard the approaching rattle of an automobile. He looked at his (for lack of a better word) watch.

It was December 3, 1926.

At that precise moment there was a mechanical squeal followed by crashing sounds and a thud, coming from beyond a nearby grove of trees.

He grinned and gave a little stamp of his foot, in appreciation of perfect timing. Then he turned and ran in the direction of the accident.

The automobile was not seriously damaged, although steam was hissing from the radiator cap under the hood ornament. The bug-eyed headlights stared as if in shock. So did the woman seated behind the wheel. Her cloche hat had flown off her head and lay outside the car. He picked it up and presented it to her with a bow. She turned her pale unhappy face to look at him, but said nothing.

"Here's your hat, Mrs. Christie. Say, you're lucky I came along when I did. I think you've had a bump on the head. That sort of injury can cause amnesia, you know."

She did not respond.

"Don't worry, though. Everything's going to turn out all right. Allow me to introduce myself, ma'am. I represent the Chronos Photo-Play Company. You know, I'm quite a fan of your mystery novels. That *Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, that was a real peach. You ought to do more with that Hercule Poirot guy."

She just looked at him sadly.

"Tell you what." He leaned his elbow on the door and looked deep into her eyes. "You look like a lady who could use a vacation. Maybe at a nice anonymous seaside resort. What do you say we go off and have a nice private talk together over a couple of cocktails, huh?"

After a long moment of consideration she smiled.

"I don't believe I caught your name," she said. ●

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NEXT ISSUE

AUGUST LEAD STORY

Hot Australian hard-science writer **Greg Egan**, one of the most popular and critically acclaimed writers of the '90s, whose popular story "Cocoon" was on the Final Hugo Ballot in 1994, returns to these pages next issue with his first-ever novella, our lead story for August, a powerful, evocative, and compelling story called "Oceanic." In it, he takes us into the far future and across the Galaxy to a distant alien world whose human colonists have forgotten their Earthly origins, and involves us with a young boy's coming-of-age, as that boy struggles to understand the world and his place in it, and grapples with controversial and perhaps potentially deadly issues of faith and acceptance and God's Plan For The World, as well as diving deep into a literal ocean of mystery in search of answers to the kinds of questions it's always been dangerous to ask, in any age and on any world. . . . This may be Egan's best story yet, and is sure to be one of the year's most talked-about events. Don't miss it!

TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Nebula and Hugo-winner **Gardner Dozois** joins forces with Nebula and World Fantasy Award-winner **Michael Swanwick** to spin the suspenseful story of a woman alone on an isolated farm in winter who must battle a deadly monster and the monsters within herself, as she is forced to find a way to deal with insidious "Ancestral Voices"; acclaimed British hard-science writer **Stephen Baxter** takes us to a future troubled by a high-tech persistence of memory, where revelations about the meaning of life wait to be decoded within some puzzling "Dante Dreams"; multiple Nebula-winner **Esther M. Friesner** returns with an irreverent and very funny take on the Arthur legends and the Matter Of Britain, one that's, like, you know, "Totally Camelot"; popular writer **Robert Reed** gives us a powerful and poignant look at some of the things you may have to do if you want to be a "Savior" to your people—and at the cost of doing them; and in the be-careful-what-you-ask-for-you-may-get-it-department, **James Patrick Kelly** offers us something we've always said we've wanted, "Proof of the Existence of God."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column offers us some heartfelt confessions about the "Crimes of My Youth"; **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** Internet column, "You Can Get Everywhere From Here," examines some online "Experiments"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our August issue on sale on your newsstand on July 14, 1998, or subscribe today (you can also subscribe electronically, online, at our new Asimov's Internet website, at http://**www.asimovs.com**), and be sure to miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you this year!

COMING SOON

Exciting new stories by **Robert Silverberg, Paul J. McAuley, L. Timmel Duchamp, Allen Steele, Ian R MacLeod, Lisa Goldstein, Tony Daniel, William Barton, Lois Tilton, Rick Shelley, Michael Swanwick, Brian Stableford, Kage Baker, Alexander Jablokov, Robert Reed, Nisi Shawl, Tom Purdom**, and many others.

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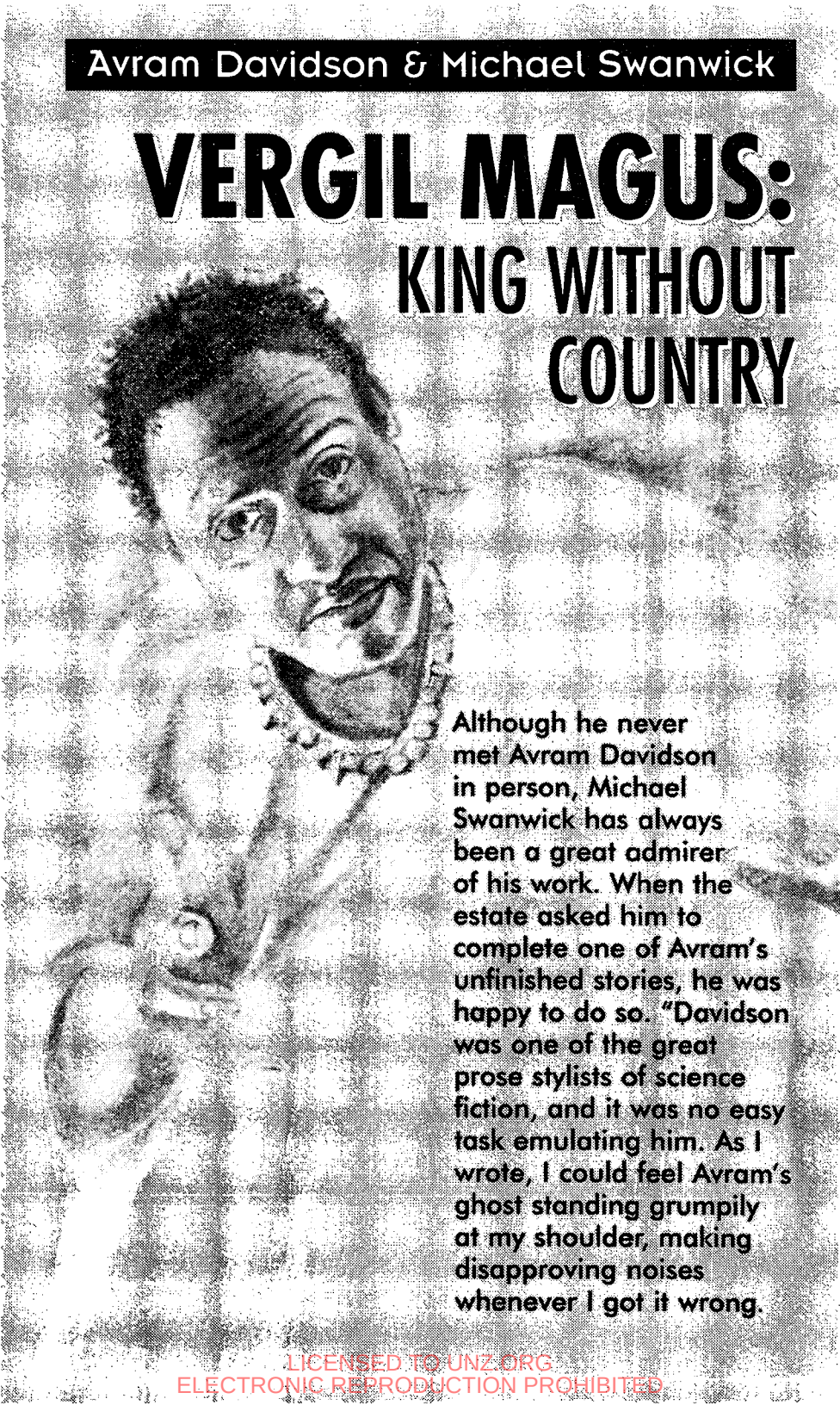
Avram Davidson & Michael Swanwick

VERGIL MAGUS: KING WITHOUT COUNTRY



Although he never met Avram Davidson in person, Michael Swanwick has always been a great admirer of his work. When the estate asked him to complete one of Avram's unfinished stories, he was happy to do so. "Davidson was one of the great prose stylists of science fiction, and it was no easy task emulating him. As I wrote, I could feel Avram's ghost standing grumpily at my shoulder, making disapproving noises whenever I got it wrong.

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He had left clues throughout the text, however, pointing the way to the story's resolution, and I am confident not only that 'Vergil Magus: King Without Country' ends the way he intended, but that I have correctly identified and solved each and every clue he planted.

Except one. I never did figure out the onions." Grania Davis, Avram Davidson's former wife and literary executor, recently finished one of Mr. Davidson's novellas—*The Boss in the Wall* (Tachyon Press, May 1998).

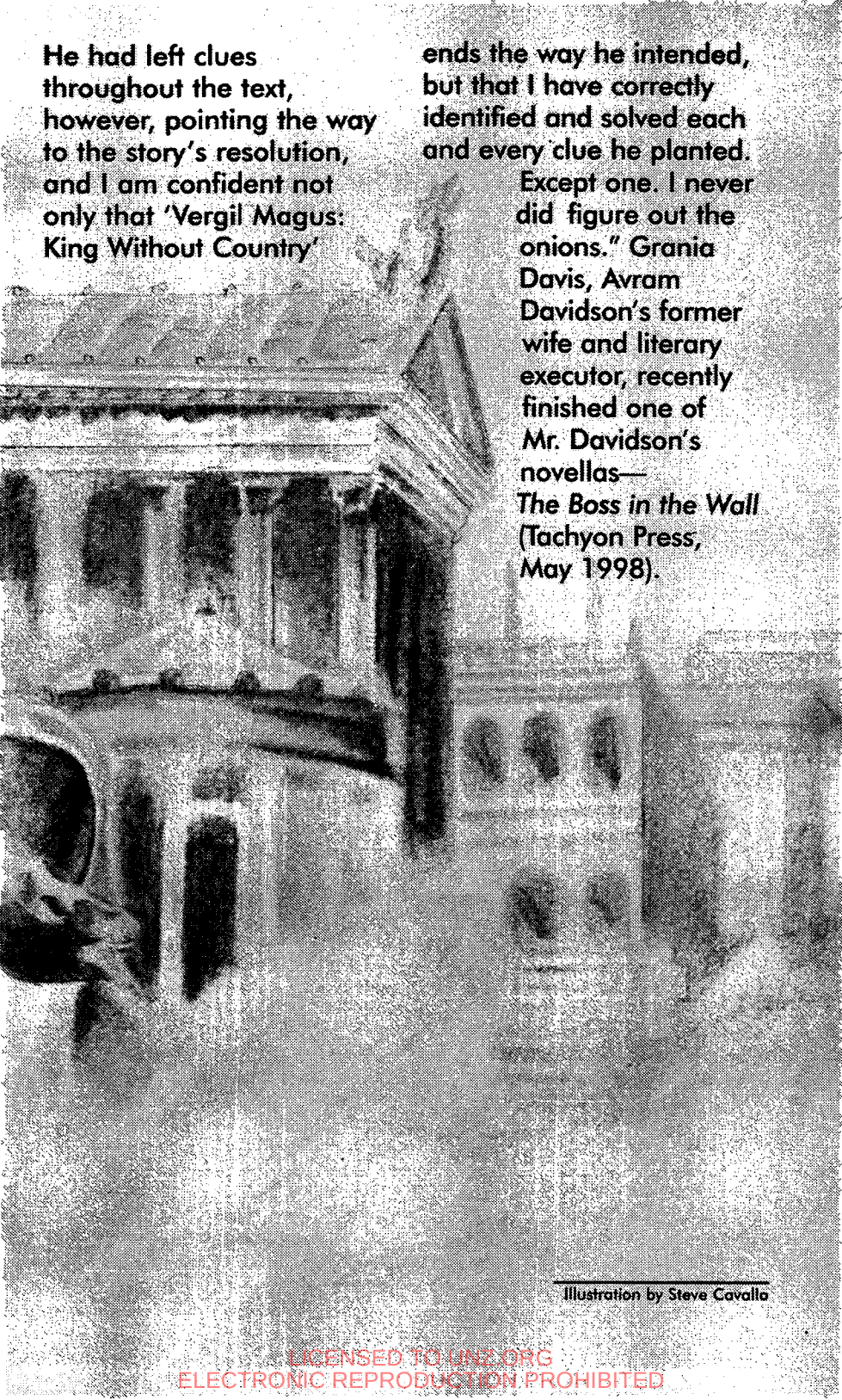

Illustration by Steve Cavalla

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Emericho, Count Mar, Master of the Ceremonies to the Emperor.
Oria, Countess Mar, Wife to the Master of the Ceremonies to the Emperor.
Count Mar came from a very high and noble family indeed, and was indeed the last of his line. There had indeed been one sole cousin, an heir to the shrunken meadows and the crumbling chastel and to the very many honors, privileges, and titles. And when he had in fact died in battle against distant barbarians so barbarous and so distant that even Count Mar as a historian of war had never even heard of them (*Turks,* they were called. They were called *Turks.* And it was assumed that now that the Sub-commander of a Legion the Knight and Patriarch Ser Audulen Mar had given his life to defeat them, that they had slunk back into the wild wastes from which they had come, and would never again be heard of. Whence? That heartland of Asia More, Bactria Extra Oxum or some such syllables and babblement. *Turks!*), Count Mar had set up an altar and burned balsamum and myrrh. Himself the August Caesar had attended, as well as members of the Old Aristocracy. Which excluded those ennobled during the last seven reigns, or, rather, their descendents . . . unless said descendents were also descended from the *Old* Aristocracy. And everyone remarked how straight and erect had been Emericho Mar, the Count Mar, the Master of the Ceremonies at the Imperial Court, at the Court Imperial.

No one knew that afterward, all the servants sent away except that one servitor as old as the Count Mar and in fact his bastard brother by a gardening-maid, no one knew that the Emperor's Master of Ceremonies had put his face upon his arms and wept aloud: not because of an especial fondness for the Sub-commander Ser Audulen Mar, whom he had never seen, nor had he ever seen his Father: but because the ancient and noble House of Mar had all but come to an end. The contents of the chastel might he leave as he would, but the chastel itself and the meadows at which grazed a flock of grizzled sheep of a race seen nowhere else, these would in no great time become escheat to the Crown Imperial, and the Emperor might do with them as he would.

House Mar: no more.

Vergil wiped the blood from the blade of his dagger, and set it aside. Carefully, he splayed the dove's intestines and read the signs: Audacibus annue coeptis. *Be favorable to bold beginnings.*

He laughed and clapped his hands. The portents, horoscopes and auspices all agreed. This would be a marvelous day for the great work.

Which visible display of cheer should have spread quickly through the workshop major. Odd that it did not. There were a dozen workmen employed in various aspects of the Great Labor and though every man set to his task with a will, they exchanged many a nervous and even dark glance. They were all on edge. They would turn hastily away at his approach, as if there were something about his clothes or his appearance or his shadow that displeased them. Yet so good was their discipline that no one did speak a word to him. Not so much as boo.

None except the Chinese wizard Ma.

Ma came trotting up to him and with puppyish eagerness, said, "Great sir, stop. You are being superstition. Consider the sky. Consider the winds. Consider all life. Instead of kill birds, you must throw coins, separate yarrow stalks, consult *Book of—*" And then stopped, chagrined, because the tome whose divinatory authority he was about to (and, it might be added, far from

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the first time) call upon was not in his immediate possession. It had been some time, indeed, since he had last seen it. He was beginning to think he had left it behind. In his study. In Tai-Ting.

"Rest assured, my young colleague," Vergil said, "that Roman science is quite advanced in the area of Prediction. Why don't you go help out Oria in the workshop minor?" He was feeling particularly tolerant today. The signs were as good as he'd ever seen them. With such omens, absolutely nothing could possibly go wrong.

Also, as a scholar himself, he understood the pain of misplacing a book.

But Ma only shook his head pityingly, and thrust his hands each up the opposite sleeve of his tunic. When he was in such a mood there was nothing to do but ignore him.

The Chinese wizard had come to Vergil, as so many things did, as a gift. Technically speaking, he was a gift to the Emperor from the Great Cham the Son of Heaven, Conqueror of Hind, Tibet, Java Major and Minor (any day now, the deed was as good as done), Benevolent and Absolute Sovereign of the Middle Lands, aka Cathay, Qara-Khita, Greater Meng-tse, Serica, the Land of Silk, et cetera and cetera, amen. Who had heard distant reports of his beloved cousin's glory and so sent, along with his compliments, a caravan of presents, including jugglers, carvers-of-ivory-balls, tigers, elephants, book-printing machines and mechanics to operate them, blackpowderers, kite-makers, fireworks artisans, and the odd inconvenient lateral heir to the throne itself, to say nothing of robes of hyacinth-purple silk, bolts of fine scarlet cloth, sandalwood casks of emeralds y-carven with Zodiacal ideograms, hempen sacks of peppercorns from Malabar and Tellicherry, cinnamon from Ceylon, brocades from the Isle of Lanka and dragon's blood from Serendip, oh really the entire catalog is too tedious for recital. Let it be said: Munificent.

So the caravan set out for Rome. Past the Great Wall. Past the Gobi Desert. Over the cold Pamirs. Past the frozen and lofty Himalayas. Over the Oxus and the Jaxartes Rivers. Under the shadow of the Great Stone Tower. Across the waters of the Caspian Sea, heavy with sturgeon and epsom salts. Along the winter coasts of the Black Sea. Over the bars and shallows of the Indus with its ship-killing tides. Through the burning waters of the Erythraean Sea. Skirting first the crocodile-ridden lands of Gog and Magog, and then the hashish-beautiful lands of the Old Man of the Mountains and so to Babylon and past the ruined stump of Babel's tower and then Byzantium and . . . well, it was a long trip.

At the end of which Ma, with his thousand-drawered pothecary chest, was the sole survivor to prostrate himself before the throne and offer the Chinese Emperor's fondest compliments to his cousin, the King in Rome.

The King in Rome.

Caught ye that? as the Emperor would say. King in Rome, which was as good as to imply nowhere *outside* of Rome. It was a calculated insult. No sooner were the fatal words were out of the politically innocent (to say nothing of pig-ignorant) Chinese wizard's mouth, than the court generals bristled and clapped hands to swords, ancestral memories of martial glory kicking up dust in their ancient skulls, and prepared for the clarion call to a senseless decade or two of yet another ruinous land-war in Asia.

But Good King Festus, as the denizens of the war-foddering classes were wont to call him, when they thought of him at all, which was—let's be honest—not all that often, Festus as we began to say, had an original and straightforward mind. He knew how to make trouble disappear with a word.

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"No, no, dear child," he said with a dismissive flick of the fingers. "I am the King *of* Rome. You want the King *in* Rome, which would be . . ." He consulted with an advisor. "Vergil. King Vergil, on the Street of Mages. Down the via and second left, you can't miss it."

And so the bewildered but ever-loyal-to-his-Emperor's-command little wizard had come trotting down the yellow brick streets of Rome and into Vergil's life.

"It's going to explode!" the bellows-boy screamed.

The apparatus was a combination of pelican and sublimatory. Which is to say that the furnace had an iron bar running transversely through it just below the thick glass pelican (thus regulating temperature) and a perforated disk above that that held the glass vessel in place and vented the hot gases from the furnace. The pelican had two looping necks that returned the distillate to its residue for redistillation. Which process—called cohobation—might recur some five hundred times before a state of absolute purification was achieved.

Cohobation. An unlovely word. And yet . . .

An emerald through cohobation might improve its water threefold, though it were cheaper to simply buy a finer stone.

A base metal such as lead could, through cohobation, be improved into gold at a cost not *many* times greater than the value of the gold.

A certain Tincture through cohobation could be so clarified as to extend life—and in perfect health! no sibylline ironies *here!*—for so long as to be . . . well, indefinite. And no price was too great for that.

If one succeeded.

If the apparatus did not explode and kill everyone in the laboratory first.

The prevention of which catastrophe lay not in spells, talismans, and the employment of minor demons, but in regulation, constancy, a discerning eye. Watchfulness! While his laboratorians labored in silence, Vergil stood unblinking (those who mistook the sorcerer's stare for aught other than simple and absolute attentiveness, who indeed found it downright *spooky,* were simply misinformed) and motionless. He held in his mind and at the tip of his tongue a cantrip for the regulation of the heat. Apprentice smiths extended long spoons (called "devil-suppers") into the flames, each spoon containing a liquid that would bubble, steam, or sublime at a different known temperature. So that when a gust of wind coming through the laboratory door caused the flames to rise and hotten, Vergil was ready.

He spoke a certain Word.

With a *whoosh,* the flames leaped toward the ceiling beams. White-hot they were, far hotter than could be explained by any natural process. Hot almost as that Red Man whom Vergil had confronted (and fought; and defeated) in the deserts of Lybya. Insanely hot. Magically hot.

"It's going to explode!" the bellows-boy screamed.

All stood frozen with horror.

Save Ma, who stepped forward and calmly poured a sack of salt over the flames.

With appropriate sputterings and smokings and belchings of stinks, the flames subsided. "What a mess!" exclaimed Petronius, his blacksmith-general. "What a damnable mess."

Vergil, though outwardly composed, was disposed to agree. His contrivances, to say nothing of his cantrips, had been of the best—he was sure of

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that—and the auspices had been perfect. Yet it was his application of a spell to regulate the heat which had caused the flames to flare up so alarmingly. Which spell he had successfully applied an hundred times. Why had this happened?

What could possibly have gone wrong?

How?

The Emperor had given no thought to what he would do with the escheats of House Mar, as, well, why should he? Grizzled sheep, shrunken meadows, stone-cankered chastel, *pah!*, more trouble to rid oneself of than worth the getting (at least if one were as rich as—but who was?—his most August and Imperial self). But he had given a somedel thought as to what he would do with the Count Mar.

There was indeed an Empress, she came not to Court. Never? Indeed, never. She had been a camp-follower when the Sovereign, then a soldier of the line, took it into his head to marry her. She made a good-enough wife for those days, but those days were far off; the ways of court were not the ways of Petronella, Empress of all the Roman World, known generally as Aunt Pet to the hordes of nephews, nieces, ancient uncles, aged aunts, scraggy sisters, be-bent-over brothers, scrannel cousins, and all the rest of them over whom she was Empress; giving orders, handing out favors, throwing largesses of cheap coins and cheaper sweets: it pleased them, it delighted her, there she stayed, in her town of origin, received she allowances, came she never up to Rome.

Or any else where the Emperor might be encamped.

Save that once a year or so they did meet, both incognito, at a small farmhouse in the Libertiex of Etruscany. Conversation might go rather like this:

"Hast everything tha needs, Petsy?"

"Yes, Festus. Mother has tooken it into her head, she must have a closed litter, such a nonsense; 'What's thee wants ith such a thing,' I have asked her. 'Wants to crawl into it to scratch me tits, it's not befitten for the Emprey's mamm-in-law to do it fore the world!'" The Empress guffawed, showing missing teeth and present stumps.

"I'll have it sent. Does any bother thee?"

"Nay. They dasn't. Do they feed Us well at Court?"

"Too well. But there. Such is the nature of the camp. Hast any petitions or positions wanted or pointments made?"

The Empress stretched toward a basket, failed, quite, to reach it. Was the Empress . . . *fat*. . . ? Foolish question. Members of the August House are never *fat*. But sometimes they are large and comely. The Emperor fetched the basket up himself. "I've made some lists." *Had some made, I being ignorant of book,* went without saying.

"I'll bineby have a look. What's this, thy puppy dog?"

"I must always have one such. Going away, is thee, Festy?"

"Aye. Here's some Roman sauce and sausage for thee. If tha but somedel needs, send a word. If any durst vex thee, squat and cuck upon them. *Vale,* then." A brief embrace. Nothing more. Would be false.

Oria emerged from the lesser workshop, glass mask yet in her be-gloved hand. The mask was a protection against the caustics and mordants employed in alchemy, such as might threaten her perfect and most *valuable* complexion.

Setting the mask carelessly aside, she rushed into the workshop major,

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past the bellows-boy cursing and slapping at spark burns on his arms, to clutch Vergil's hands and peer anxiously up into his eyes.

"Countess," he said.

She dimpled with pleasure, as she always did when someone of quality had the courtesy to employ her proper and supposed title. Her face aglow with excitement, eyes large. A beautiful, beautiful woman was Oria.

Vacuous as three days in Gaul, but beauteous nonetheless.

What wanted she with Vergil? What did any attractive young woman with political entanglements—a dozen such he turned away from his door in a week—desire?

Aphrodisiacs.

Aphrodisiacs and fertility drugs.

Yet here was the curious fact that those who most required a love philtre were they who could least afford that knowledge be made public. It was the potion that dared not speak its name. As well ask for extract of pennyroyal to undo an unseemly swelling in the stomach! 'Twould get out.

No more did a mage of serious aspirations desire a reputation of being willing to provide such potions. There were spirits to conjure up and demons to put down. Discoveries to be made and most dire secrets to be kept. Who had the time? Life was short, alas. Life was short.

All of which led to the fastidious young Oria, with such connections as would compel cooperation from anybody, even a King Without Country, prenticing herself three mornings of the week as a pharmecary-in-training. Solely for the love of learning, to be sure. Oh, la! How she did swoon to distill and compound.

And Vergil, who was a compassionate man, had set her to learn the basics of distilling perfumes from the liqueurs of flowers and compounding ochres and vermilion for the ornamentation of the skin. She would tire of the sport, soon enough. 'Twere cruelty not to let her get from it something she'd value.

Oh, and by the bye: *don't* teach her to prepare any poisons.

Oria gaped about the shambled laboratory, blinking most prettily and simultaneously pretending not to notice the admiring glances of the workmen. It was an act of great social dexterity, one that not just *every* girl could have managed. "Who was your friend?" Oria asked, and then, "Why did he leave so suddenly?"

Ma gestured helpfully toward the door. "He go that way," he said eagerly. "Down street." Misunderstanding, as usual, the question.

"Friend?" Vergil asked blankly.

"The Black Man. Who *was* he?"

Thus far, then: the Empress. Every day for a break-the-fast she had a specially baked white bread with honey, until her twenty-fifth year she had never even *tasted* white bread. Everyday for a nonetide muncheon they brought her a fresh-made sausage of kid's flesh and veal with an abundance of onions, leeks, and garlic; she eat it boiled, with a sauce of must of yellow wine and sharp yellow spice-seed ground fine: fennel often as well. And for her supper every night they gave her a fine dish of pullets and capons and cockles also boiled, with the broth: more onions, more garlic, and carrots and parsley and weed of dill. Petronella was greatly fond of this broth and drank it loudly with frequent eructations. The fowls she pulled apart and fed bits of to her preternaturally old crone Mother and gave out larger hunks and chunks to her kin—*Eat this fine wingy, Auntie Ara.* Ah, what a tender pi'ce it

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be, a grace upon thy pudenda, niecey mine! A num a num! *That's what it's here for . . . let me pull thee off this bump of arse, so, ope thy gob*—Also His Imperial Majesty by Verteu of the Coinage Right each month had her sent five vast leathern baggs a-full of specially minted stiverkins with her own picture on one side for those who couldnae read the motto *Petronella Empratrix.* These she scattered day by day, grinning and chuckling: for this had she humped her hucklebones to many a grizzled decurion before the Festus had come to take her in marriage, for this had she brakked the ice on a muckle mountain pools and washed the Legions' filthy clothes. For this she had marched with cracked and bleeding toes many marches on far frontiers, weaving counter-spells against the frightful fearful witcheries of the Petchenegs and the Galicians and the Picts, the Sassenags and Scotes; rolled along the great wrought-iron kettle when the very ass-of-burden had perished with the cold in Northern Dace a-nigh the savage Geats, and therein had she cooked the Soldiery their stolen grain and stewed their plundered porks.

Her present life as Empress of a rude valley full of ruder peasant-kin? She loved it. She a-grudged The Festus nought. The Roman King, the Roman Roy, the King over all the Kings, His Splendor the Selected Emperor of all the Roman World? Nought. She begrudged him nought.

The Black Man. Just who the devil—and *what*—was he?

Everybody tried to talk at once. Luckily, they all had the same story to tell:

The Black Man had walked all morning in Vergil's shadow unseen. Unseen by Vergil himself, that is. Everybody else had seen him just fine, thank you, and had assumed that Vergil was equally aware of his presence, and was eager to describe this negative-apparition:

He was tall, to begin with, taller than Vergil himself, who was not a short man, by a head at least. Nay, two heads. Naw yourself, but one. Didn't blink. Had a harsh and scornful look. A look of command. Command—who'd obey such as *he?* Run's more like it. African in origin, no doubt about that, consider his features, and yet like no African anyone had ever seen. Was black too.

Blacker than an Aethiope.

Blacker than an alembic's bottom.

Black.

What did he in Vergil's shadow? Well, he gestured thus and so. Arms wide. Fingers a-wiggle. Most particularly had he gestured thus when Vergil cast his ill-fated cantrip. The gestures that were made—but perhaps they were not accurately reproduced; "to lie like an eye-witness" being a phrase of most ancient lineage—were like nothing Vergil had ever encountered. He had made his gestures and then retreated to the doorway, to watch their results. Had left shortly after Ma poured salt on the flames. Was now gone. Where, no man knew.

"Emericho Count Mar."

"Roy over all the Roys, I hear but to obey."

They were in the Great Red Room in the New Palace. A sage-femme had once said that red was good again the measles. None had changed it syne. "The Archiver, ah, the *Great* Archiver, he tells me that at least five generations of your line, that Line of Mar, descended so he says from the gens of th'Emperor Marius, at least five have served this Imperial Court and Seat. Saith well? Saith well. All know that none but the House of Mar knows best the Ceremonies and the Manners. We wish Count Mar to understand quite

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well that there is a certain Lady very close to the Imperial Heart whom We should wish to see at Court. She be of good sound yeoman stock, you know, Count Mar, a widow-woman, her late vir was a captain of tens in the Sylvan Legion that fought valiantly in the Second War of . . ."

It was a work of vanity for the Roman Roy to tell Count Mar what War the Sylvan Legion had fought in valiantly, Count Mar already knew; Count Mar knew all such things. All such things of import. And Count Mar knew well exactly what his Sire and Ser imported, the Emperor imported now that he would that a someone of rank should marry this a-said Lady so very close to the Imperial Heart, and by so doing give title and status to her, in fait the Roy's chief concubine. For, without someone of such rank did so, she might no more appear at Court than the laundress, be the laundress never so close to said Imperial Heart. Certes that no young man might do, for a young man might easily allow his veins to carry him away with a notion that literally he was a husband to the Lady, and to attempt and insist upon the fact. And this would not do, it would not do. And for sure that no one of recent creation of nobility would serve, for such had so very odd notions of their stature, the very newness of their station being such as to make them sensitive about it.

But someone of Emericho Mar's age and Emericho Mar's antiquity of title? Such a one would ken full well that 'twas an honor to be the Crown Lady and, hence, in mere title the husband and the vir de jure of the Crown Lady: an honor. Others? Let others prate that *Antiquity means decadence,* and *Let no baron be a bawd to the Bed Royale.* Mar was indifferent to such things. What held Rome together? The Roman Roy, held it. The Emperor was the sole fount of honor to the Empery, and therefor so— And the Emperor Festus, that same Festus, spoke very keenly to the Count Mar's ear when he murmured, "There are certain folk at Court descended from creations of the last three reigns who might look upon this with scorn . . ."

". . . *canaille* . . ." muttered Count Mar. Rabble, what had *they* to be scornful about: contractors grown rich selling musty meats and rotten grain to the Governance-at-War, parvenus from Over-the-Seas whose origins might be (and therefore were) unspeakably low; the get of rich lawyers, sons of successful engineers (by definition: common as tufa), painted pimps, and tax-farmers; foreigners using tainted fortunes (foreign? by meaning: tainted) to buy their titles: Count Mar regarded the New Nobility as he might the throng about a bawdy house. ". . . *canaille* . . ." What did *they* have to be scornful about? Furthermore did he knew for a fact that some of them had got their feet in the stirrups of the Order of Knights by charms and cantrips and by witchery and guile unspeakably vile, their women being poisoners and abortionists and contrivers at assignation. Scarcely did such so-called nobility know how to adjust a toga. Eh? The Emperor? Clean a different thing, the Emperor was selected by seven kings (some said: seventeen: sage folk split no hairs), and by the process of Selection became Roy, became Royal. *Numinous.*

Strapping the sword about his waist—the *inconvenient* sword that was almost as much a nuisance as the young Chinese pothecary was, for he was obligated to wear it will-he, nill-he wherever he went these days, his badge of office, the sword with no name—Vergil set out to find the Black Man.

It was on the face of it no easy task to find a single man among the swarming millions of Rome. Yet even in eternal and eternally jaded Rome a man seven feet tall, darker than any Aetheopian, and unblinking—such a man is noticed. And, for a copper or two, remembered.

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The trail of small coinage led Vergil first to a poor neighborhood, and then to a yet-poorer tenement house. Three cabbage-smelling flights up, there was a door. He hammered on its frame. A silence. The creak of feet on old floorboards. The door opened.

Skin black as obsidian. Eyes unblinking as a snake's. "I am in the presence of an inferior," he said to the air. "But *how* inferior is he? Does he have such standing among his barbarous upstart race as to allow him admittance to my domicile without shame to me?"

Seeing his bearing, the palpable hauteur that hung about the man, the sneer that had not been achieved in less than thirty generations, Vergil knew the man for Aristocracy in his own land. Nor New Aristocracy, nor *Old* Aristocracy either. Old, *Old* Aristocracy. Older than the founding of Rome. Older than the rise of the Greeks or the Abyssinians before them. Older, perhaps, than the Flood.

Old.

Suppressing a quite inappropriate urge to bow, Vergil drew himself up and called upon his titles. "I hight Vergil Marius Mago, Bail to the Vicus of Ravenna, Captain of the Communality, Ser Messenger to the Doge of Naples and to the Vicar Imperial of the South, Co-Keeper of the Golden Clicket to the Golden Lock, Titular Count of Calabria, Titular Prince of Palermo, High Baron of High Barbary, Min Dan in Danland, Roman Knight and Patrician of the Romans, Magister of the Mountains with Ambulatory Jurisdiction . . ." Suchlike worldly tokens did not Vergil himself impress; nor, he saw, was the Black Man moved by them as well. Feeling absurdly like a small child reciting his accomplishments before a visiting adult dignitary, he cut short the list of his civic (for he did not of course mention any of the ranks he held in The Order of Sages and Mages; such were forbidden) honors. "King Without Country."

The Black Man moved aside to let him in.

There was a feel in the room . . . of power . . . indecipherable, though. It came from the Black Man himself, but was like nothing Vergil had ever felt. Intuited. Experienced. Vergil well knew the feel and smell and even color of magic. This was nothing like.

This was something before which sorcery was a weak and strutting upstart. This was its negation and perfect opposite.

"I am stranded upon your sterile shore," the Black Man said. "Without family or friend or wealth. As for family, I am the last of my kind, and as for friends . . ." He shrugged. "But before I die, I would return to my homeland. Gold will buy my way south to Nilus Meroë and Ophir, and from there to Farther Africa, where memory of Good King Boris may yet endure, and then through Equinox to lands whose names need not be defiled by your ears. So: gold I must have. My talents have been engaged by one who thinks his lineage sufficient. It is not. Yet the one behind the one behind that one I may without disgrace serve."

"Sir, I quite understand. As the poet said, it is enough to have perished once. Let us not compound poverty with disgrace. Yet your activities . . ." he sought the neutral word, *"inconvenience* me. Surely you can see how they would?" No response from that face. Might's well be carved of obsidian. Or, more aptly, black granite, like certain monumental visages that Vergil had seen in Aegypt of that conqueror Dynasty that had swept down from the South like wolves upon the . . . well, not lambs, exactly. And yet . . . "Let me

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propose a solution. I have money. It flows to me effortless, these days; 'tis not my doing, but fate alone and my lack of desire for such; were I to bar my doors and windows 'gainst it, 'twould smash them down in its eagerness to reach me. Allow me to share some small fraction of my good fortune with you. Say . . . twice what your sponsor offers? No names required! Only allow me the honor of paying for your peaceable passage home."

For a long moment, silence.

Finally, "How came you to be King Without Country? Is it—" the Black Man hesitated— "an *old* title?"

When Vergil was done explaining, the Black Man looked thoughtful. "It is not a hereditary position, then?"

"No."

"I had thought—well." The Black Man stood. "I am afraid you must leave now, sir. I can do nought to help you."

With greatest courtesy, he showed Vergil to the door.

Count Mar led the lady in question to the Nuptial Throne and by himself placed upon her fair hair the matron's saffron veil and drew it down upon her brow: Oria, her name.

As for whatso gifts the Crown and Throne might make available in the Fisc to the order of the Count Mar, the Count Mar was largely indifferent. Now and then he drew upon them to erect monuments to sundry foreparents not yet memorialized, including that famous Roman matron Julia, the *Conjux Carissima,* who had died fighting side by side with her vir, Audan, against the Samnites near Néapoly. Every now and then, using a small chauldron filled with Earth of Delphos and a brazier of burning laurel leaves, Count Mar would summon up the shades of his ancestors: and look on them at battle for the Roman altars and the Roman hearts.

However, less and less, lately.

The third day of the third week of each month (barring the Summers' heats) had usually . . . well . . . often . . . seen Count and Countess Mar together, not so much at Chastel Mar—though there, too—she savoring, even slightly, the pretense of being in fact as well as in law a Lady of Title with her titled husband in their titled fortress; he savoring, even . . . and thus and thus . . . the fancy of having a real wife. He *had* had one. Once. Long ago. She was dead. The child too. But as for the most of the hours of the third day of the third week of each month they had showed each other off where the Roman World could see. Reclined together as they were borne in one litter. Sat side by side in the same carriage rolling and rocking ponderously but elegantly (one did not think of *comfort* in those slow, clumsy vehicles: one thought of *show.* Paint. Gilt. Escutcheons. Heavy well-kempt horses with scarlet harness; heavy well-kempt horsemen in scarlet livery) down some suburban road. Worshipping together. Paying visits.

But for a full six months now: less. In fact: seldom.

And the old count's concern and increasing vexation about this seemed to fit in with his vexation and increasing concern in the matter of the King Without Country. Vergil by name.

By name Vergil.

King Without a Country.

Which King returned to his workshop to find it empty. Those hired specific to the day's work had been, of course, released. But Petronius, his black-

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smith-general, who should have been repairing the damage and then awaiting his further instructions was also gone, along with—what was more ominous—all five of his sons.

The Chinese wizard Ma entered the workshop, face stiff with disapproval. "I warn. I say, you are like wine-skin that bulge with wine. Full of own thoughts and ideas. If you not empty yourself, I say, how you expect me to teach you? Hah? But they no listen."

"Where?" Vergil asked, with a premonitory chill. "Where did they go?"

Smiths are all sorcerers. Repeat: all. Consider Vulcan, consider Hephaestus, consider Daedalus, consider Weyland of Gaul . . . the list could be extended indefinitely. Or, if not sorcerers, then alchemists, which is to say privy to the exoteric if not the esoteric secrets of Guildery. Which, combined with the formidable musculature resultant from a regular fourteen hours per day at forge and anvil relieved by frequent leathern tankards of cooling buttermilk, inevitably combined to convince all the breed of their own invincibility.

When such strong, knowing, and confident men were *loyal* as well . . . 'Twas a formula for disaster. In their self-certitude, they would feel for their Master a combination of protectiveness and condescension. They would think it proper to follow him to a dangerous confrontation, from a distance to be sure!, and wait nearby with their hammers and amulets to see its outcome. And when their Master swept by the alley in which they lurked, dark-browed and clearly defeated in his purpose . . . why, then, they would bethink themselves to take matters into their own brawny and capable hands.

So reasoned Vergil Magus as he ran through the piss-yellow streets of Rome, the nameless sword slapping against his side with every running stride, the Chinese magician squeaking and scurrying in his wake. Back the way he had come. Into the slums. To the tenement where the Black Man dwelt.

He turned a corner and stopped, aghast. Before him stood Petronius, smith-gen. and artisan . . . burning, aflame, sooty flakes rising from the crisped horror of his body. And his five sons as well. They all six burned like candles fallen into the fireplace coals.

It was too late to help any of them. Yet still, Vergil tried. He did try. Moving widdershins, he called up his salamandaric powers, learnt in the Phoenicia of Sidon and not in the Phoenicia of Tyre (Tyre, burned to rock and ashes; Sidon, yet standing), and attempted to quench the flames.

With such lore had he defeated Phoenix himself. Yet now did the flames respond most disobediently, leaping toward the sky, hottening, burning whiter than angels . . . until, fuel gone, they dwindled, guttered and died.

Leaving nothing behind but greasy stains on the brick street.

Beyond where Petronius and his sons had been stood the Black Man, unblinking. Their eyes met and Vergil's mind filled with words. He had heard others, both human and *not,* speak within the sanctuary of his skull before. This was not like that. Rather, it was as if every word in his head, other than these, had temporarily been erased.

You were shown hospitality. And betrayed it.

Vergil Magus stumbled away, numb with horror.

A here and a there and of a not infrequent time, the presence of a king was requisite; even the times of the republics had known the Kings of the Sacrifices. Kingdom after kingdom had been added to the Empery, was it not so? So it was. An empiry was by definition a foederation of kingdoms and of

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kings. Not so? So. And so it was not alone natural, it was necessary, that kings of kingdoms, roys of royaumes, should participate in certain matters of empery, that empery being as it were a kingdom of kings. The Council to Confirm the Accession of Territory. The Council to Advise on the Sending of Envoys into the OEconomion and Beyond. Council to Supply the Tars and Spars for the Fleet. Council to Authorize Debasement of Common Currency. And so on. And on, so. Now on the one hand a king might well agree that action on this matter or on that ought not occur saunce consent of kings, still, not always did a king wish to leave his own kingdom. *Dost tha see?* as Festus Imperator et Rex used to ask. Suppose a needed council required the presence of a set of kings. Perhaps to authorize (or not) the inclusion of another kingdom yet. Might the King of Cappadoce not feel affairs at home steady enough for him to leave. Perhaps the three Kings of Gaul did not trust one another at the time. Possibly the King of Aspania was in sooth sick. And yet a quorum was needed. Suppose said quorum of kings required another king more? what to do . . . what to do. . . ? And then as well. Imagine that a king from outside the Empery arrived as visitor and guest, what more pleasant that, on route to be received by the Emperor said King (of Cush, let one say) said foreign king be first received by a king of the Empery? Agreed: 'twould be pleasant, good for good relations—*Thrice welcome, Scion of Memnon, Melcarth's Heir.*

—but suppose there *was* no King of the Empery to receive him?—

Eh?

What then?

Often the Emperor might wish to take council of someone higher than a mere councilor. A consul? one of the (always) two Consuls of Rome, of which by now the Emperor was always one? This would not always, for various reasons, do. Hence the Emperor Ptolemy, but three reigns ago, finding himself in need of a King in Rome when no Kings *were* in Rome, took hold of The Patrician Ser Appius Appian, and crowned him King. "King over *what?* . . . Your Imperial Majesty? . . ." "All in good time, there. Presently. Come forth thou, then, King Appius Appian, and sit at my side in a royal seat." The need, whatever it was, being by and by over: so what then? See now Ptolemy showing that what wit he had was not a false byword: a Document of Full Appointment of Appius Appian to be King Without Country.

King Without Country!

A master stroke.

Every right and pleasure and duty that any other King had (outside his own country), so had the King Without Country. Any office that any other King could hold (outside his own country), so could be held or holden by the King Without Country. And . . . but . . . here came the kernel within the nut . . . however . . . *no one who had ever held the Office of King Without Country could ever hold the Office of Emperor.* At one stroke just about any cause for jealousy among any of the Seven (or Seventeen) (not less than Seven) (not more than Seventeen) Selectoral Kings was removed. Why be jealous of some fellow in distant Rome? Why fear any plotting, what might he plot about? *The King Without Country could never be selected Emperor.* He might resign. He might be appointed and crowned another time or another hundred times: never might he, in royal office or in out, be selected Emperor.

And even, mark this, many ones said to many other ones, should an Emperor suspect that such a one, a clever fellow, capable, popular, charming, might possibly even if not now take steps to become Emperor e'en though not

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a King (in within the letter of the Iron Laws, some man not a King might be selected to the Seat Imperial)—that such a one might someday intrigue . . . might plot . . . take up arms . . . plan . . . connive . . . this or that . . . someone alas not politic to kill. . . . Well! A solution was always at hand. Kneel, thou loyal subject dan Fulano. We crown thee King Without Country. Rise, Fulano King.

As for income, income must follow. Income might follow out of the condescension of the Imperial Hand. And . . . even if the Hand Imperial be stayed a bit just then . . . there was always this: A purse of such and such at every Ides or Kalends. To be paid out of the Salt Gabelle. For salt was not *very* difficult to procure. Salt was an Imperial Monopoly. *Byword: the Roman Roy doth eat no salt.* Meaning: The Hand Imperial received all the income from the Salt Gabelle. And gave it all away. The astronomer Such-a-One had discovered a new star? named it after the Emperor? or the Empress? A purse of six gold solids. From the Salt. The salt. Byword: *The Roman Fisc is full of salt.* Somewhere there was said to be a tribe, a sect, a sept, which designedly did eat no salt. So 'twas said, and, 'twas said, always their teeth fell out and their finger- and toe-nails, too. Nay, but each soul it must eat salt. There was always plenty salt. The tax itself? A trifle. A few stivers to the sack. The sack was large. Even if the Emperor was not lavish in assigning fiefs and such, still, never lacked for money in his purse, Whosoever: King Without Country. Nom.

When you have led through the Court Ceremonies a maritime magnate almost like a bear save that he had braided nostril-hair and broke wind with every ponderous step, then a well-mannered wizard was perhaps an acceptable relief. The Mage Vergil was more than civil to the Master of the Ceremonies. The Master of the Ceremonies was never more than civil to anyone.

Except to his wife.

When he was with her.

Vergil sat alone by lantern-light, closeted with books. He was alone. Save for Ma, of course. Who was (politely, admittedly, oh, invariably politely) hectoring him again. He must learn *fang-shwee,* path of dragons, paint a circle on the wall, place a mirror before the door so that any goblins entering would see their reflections and flee, direct a stream *just so* through the courtyard. All in the name of harmony and balance. It was easy enough to ignore, though every now and then a sentence would pop up out of the murmurous flow and astound:

"Must drink own urine every morning. Then never get sick."

A less charming way to start the day Vergil could not imagine. Scowling, he concentrated on his grimoires, grammaryes, and tomes of discouraged lore (it would be centuries before anybody would be so foolishly selfless as to actively *forbid* such useful learnings). And here, now, before him, what was this? A rarely employed technique labeled *Magica Alba.* White Magic. A magic of blizzards and milk, presumably, of lilies and ivory and goose down. Yes. With rising excitement, he began to read.

Yet even as his mind sought to fix itself upon the words, they wavered on the page, growing fluid in outline. Moistly the ink pulled itself up and off the parchment and formed into globs like quicksilver that rolled off the book and plashed from the slanted top of the reading table.

Leaving him with ink-blackened floor and a manuscript book of virgin parchment.

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With a groan, Vergil raised his hands to the heavens (indeed, the roof was in the way; yet his intent was clear) and cried, "Where . . . *how* can I learn the secret of the Black Man's power?"

"That easy," said Ma. "I tell you."

Was Count Mar surprised when the Emperor Festus made Vergil Magus his King Without Country? No one ever knew if Count Mar ever was surprised. If he thought (others thought) (some others thought) that a background as the adopted son of a former servant to a company of wandering astrologers turned farmer was scarcely an aristocratic one, the Count Mar said not so. Said the Count Mar, at the point The King Without Country kneels upon his left knee: so. The King Without Country now arises. So. Let here at this point The King Without Country kneel upon his right knee, bow his head once . . . twice . . . thrice . . . so.

Such, the conversations between Vergil King Without Country and Count Mar. The Master of the Ceremonies and the Roy Saunce Royaume. In fact, the neither of them gave a much thought about the other one of them. And then one day—

But wait. *Earlier.*

For full six months now, more and more seldom were the gaunt old he and the buxom young she seen together. When last had they dined at the high table in the Chastel at which nom else dining had been there for decades? Long. It beseemed the aged Count. Seldom were he and wife seen together? Seldom *were* together. More and more as the auld conde sat in the cold library in his chilly chastel unrolling the rent rolls of a hundred years before, looked down upon by gesturing posturing sword-brandishing members of the Line of the House in their dusty likenesses and limnings, or making notations for the tenth time about the Journal of his Grandser's campaign against the Kingdom of Carsus—or some such prideful and utterly vain antiquarianizing—more and more often did he realize it was and was only on the said third day, The Third Day, when his chamberman brought him a message and an elaborately carved and adorned case containing straw-padded covered dishes: "My Lord the Count, my ser and sire. My Lady the Countess much regrets that her work at Court with the Empress's Silk Woman [Attiring Woman] [Embroidery Woman] must needs alas prevent my Lady the Countess," babble . . . babble . . . babble . . . "and send herewith a disk of one brace of partridges farced with liver of lark and almondbread," babble . . .

. . . babble . . .

. . . babble . . .

. . . babble . . .

Suddenly.

(What? when the Empress, never coming to Court, had no use of silk, embroidery, or attire soever! of a surety the things were for the use of the Countess, sole; what then?)

Suddenly there entered vision of a scene small thought of at the time. Vergil King passing through the Hall at Court wearing his trews of white samite and a broidered tabard, looped round with ropes of wire of gold the scabbard of a sword that only a King might wear at Court, passing in a quiet and full-seemly pace; should pass at angle before him and at once kneel and quickly kiss his hand, *who?* Oria, the Countess Mar. So. Of course she needs kneel and kiss the royal hand, the hand of any roy, cum royaume or saunce

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royaume. It was seemly that the king would at once half-bow and raise her. A word of grace between them. She passed on her way. He passed on his. A thing of nought.

And now this day, The Third Day of the Third Week of the Month, what? She was not to be here. Thus, what. Kissed the hand of the King Without Country. Was not to be here to be one sole day with her vir, her own husband. Was at Court, was perhaps even now a-kissing the hand of—*Lightning-bolt*: Why should not Count Mar, of his ancient House and Line, why should *he* not be, have been, *King Without Country?* There came to his mind: reply? nom. Count Mar's pride was high and deep. It was also very narrow. High and narrow. Narrow and deep. And thus he sat alone at his table, suddenly full of bitterness. And brooding sullen, ancient pride.

Sat he there long? None marked the time. In tumbling seeds of sand, selected by some long-dead sandifer for the hour-glass, perhaps not long at all. He sat. His chamberman stood. Usually Count Mar would flick his fingers at the courtly kickshaws, the chamberman would then serve a tepid polenta with cheap cheese, take away the dainty victuals and eat them with his family (his family would rather have had the common, coarse feeds to which they were accustomed, but the chamberman considered it a stiver saved and carefully dropped a stiver in his savings-pot; someday he thus hoped to buy a milch-goat for his thrall-mother, growing too old for chewing even turnips, even grain). (Even common-folk have feelings, some philosophes know it not, eheu.) Usually, then, indeed, always, disturbed in his reflections on family pride, senile hunger satisfied and sated with traditional porridge or such loblolly, the Count's habits inclined him rise and go to Court.

To duty.

To duty.

For—family dead . . . or . . . all save one . . . and he half-dead—what remained?

Duty remained. Duty. Duty. Therein the real glory of the Line of the house of Mar of the gens of Marius Marcus, not sword and spear and brave death in battle, not for them alone, but in this: Duty. Duty. And if duty took the form of one who had usurped a place that should by rights have been and be his own? That scrawn stirk of the outlands? son of really who knows whom? Called "Marius" too, was he? All the more, then! Some day the stirk would stumble. The knacker would have already made sharp the knife.

So Vergil listened while Ma explained a totally new (to him) system of divination.

Passivity seemed to be the key. Where conventional forms of foreseeing the future all tried to impose order on the universe, this divination demanded nothing, imposed nothing, expected nothing. All the world, Ma explained, was flux and flow (well; even the Greeks knew *that*; could not step in the same river twice; nor even once; perhaps there was not even a river; but that was digression), and if one could but discern the direction of this flow . . . well, then one would ken whither it goest. Eh? By the reading of small, random, and chaotic events, the greater could be discerned. Once explained, it was orthodoxy itself.)

It was worth a try, anyway.

Ma went into a frenzy of activity, removing dark yerbs from his chest of many drawers, boiling water, preparing a suffusion. At last he proffered a

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cup of dark liquid to Vergil. "Now. You drink down most way to bottom. Not all way. Stop here. Most important, you stop here. Not later." Ma drew an imaginary line four-fifths of the way down to the bottom.

Vergil bethought him of the many visionary potions he had imbibed in his researches, and their attendant side-effects. Vomiting, diarrhea, headaches, to begin with, and progressing quickly to bleeding from the nostrils, mucous discharge from the anus, rashes laced with boils, incontinence, simultaneous loss of hair and balance, spontaneous generation of worms within the flesh. . . . The more primitive the culture, it seemed, the greater the discomfort attendant upon discovering so simple a thing as the future. "Wouldn't it be simpler to just pour it off?" he asked.

"Drink."

He took a sip. The dark liquid was bitter and astringent. He shuddered and with suppressed loathing drank the rest, down to the prescribed line. Then he handed the cup to Ma.

Holding the cup in his left hand, Ma swirled the liquid three times around and then with a snap of the wrist inverted the cup onto the table. When he removed it, the wet *chai* leaves had formed a pattern.

Both men leaned low over the leaves.

"What does it say?" Vergil asked.

"What? Hey? Seneschal—what?" The seneschal was a-most as old as his courtly master. "My sire and ser, my dan the Count. A visitor. His Honor the Varlet to the Vavaseur of Idalia."

A varlet to a vavaseur was so low on the List of Honor as barely to be there at all. But be there he was. Be *here* he was. Who the devil *was* he? Who the devil was *he?*

Duty. Duty. Duty.

"The Varlet to the Vavaseur of Idalia will munch with me."

A gust of sudden sigh. "I am so unworthy—"

"True," said the Count Mar. In the air, hanging, *Nevertheless,* unbespoke. The chamberman set the trestle-table. The visitor got one of the partridges and the Count addressed himself to his nutmeal mush. The chamberman and the other partridge withdrew. (The extra-ancient Mother-thrall might mumble the almondbread dressing with loud *Ooos* of delight, or she perhaps would spet it out with even louder *phoophs.* One never knew. Life was full of change and interest even for a serf.) The Count, meanwhile, completely forgot that he even *had* a visitor; his pale-blue eyes slightly milky, even a thin film upon them like that upon a lightly basted egg, and rimmed with red, veined and weined with red, looked upon an older scene: a Chastel mar filled with noble men-at-arms, the Old Count's Father, the Older Count, in armor and full prime and pride of life, and— But such scenes with or without the assistance of Delphic earth and burning smoking laurel-leaves, such scenes no longer served. Even as a prisoner will sate and cloy his womanless life with masturbatory fantasies, so for long and long the Count Mar had sated and cloyed his warless life with fantasies of war. After many a winter the prisoner's fantasies cease to have any individual particularity, merge into one single flattened-out omnifantasy, and cease to be of an avail: so the bellic fantasies of the Old Count Mar.

In his heart he cried *War! War!* but there was no war.

"The bosom is full of thorns—"

What? *What?* What strange buffoon was this, ill-shaved, ill-washed, in

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dusty integuments, hypocrisy overlaying him like a membrane thin: but clearly visible; *who?* Instantly recognized, the worn-down badges of a varlet . . . authorized to fly the narrowest of bannerets . . . and of a vavaseur . . . the lowest rank of an hereditary honor . . . *the serf of a thrall, a scullion's vassal,* instanta formed the scornful thought . . . but which vavaseur? which yerb upon that dirt-and sweat-stained broidered badge, *which?*—second knowledge to the old courtier: *Idalia.* Produce: Thyme.

"The bosom is full of thorns to observe how this wittold warlock The King Without Country—"

Count Mar was full awake now, "'The King Without Country,' *what—?"*

Doggedly the shabbykins repeated his stupid formula, *that the bosom was full of thorns,* "to observe how this wittold warlock The King Without Country behaves, to the total and intire dishonoring of the lordly Count Mar, Reverenced and Worshipful Master of the Ceremonies—"

The so-pale-blue of the ancient eyes deepened. The yellowed face tightened. Even the untrimmed white hairs in the nostrils bristled. The whole figure of the classical and insulted figure was at once full of life—

—of rage—

—like a hungry wolf who lights upon a scent—upon a spoor—

"And so? the Varlet to the Vavaseur of Idalia? *eh?* EH?"

The visitor let his eyes roll around the room, proved it empty save for he and host. Eyes a-gleam like a beastling's in the night; he bent forward, unbrushed brow-hairs, untrimmed cheekbones, ears, unwashed body—reek! sharp! pungent! careless of all—

"There is come from the crypto-court of the unacknowledged heir to Boris King of Africa, of Farther Africa, Count Mar," he whispered as be leaned; "a one with a singular specialty of craft. *He performs sorceries upon sorcerers!"* Triumphant, the man sat back. Smacked the table softly with his palms.

Count Mar smacked his own palms upon it, pushed himself up. His mouth dropped open. And, *"War!"* he cried.

He cried, *"War!"*

"War! War! War! War!"

Fumbled in his pouchet. Withdrew a whetstone. And next drew forth a knife.

The Black Man stood in the middle of the Street of Mages, waiting for Vergil. Had this been difficult to arrange? It had *not.* Though the Black Man had abandoned his tenement lair ("Skipped out, and good riddance," said his landlord, spitting for luck on a floor that had patently endured more than its share of such treatment), Vergil had simply sent criers throughout Rome crying a challenge to the Black Man to meet in the Street of Mages at noon. It was a challenge he knew would not be refused.

A challenge to fight a wizard's duel.

The Black Man, as had been said, stood waiting. In the crowd to his back, hopping excitedly from foot to foot, waving scrawny fists, shouting deprecations (and yet nobody save Vergil paid him any attention; might's well be one of the hundreds at a chariot race for all the attention he got; and Vergil paid him little enough) was Mar of House Mar. He was tired of being a spectator. He had come to smell blood.

Not that blood had much of a smell *per se.* Which fact Count Mar knew. He was a historian of war. It was in a metaphoric sense that he desired the smell.

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There were thousands of onlookers, for the criers had gone everywhere. The buildings bulged with spectators. The roofs overflowed. Many had brought with them lunches. In front of the workshop behind Vergil all his faithful workmen, even those whom he had not seen in years, stood shoulder to shoulder in their best smocks, displaying solidarity with their sorcerous Magister. Everyone who could talk his way in was there, Oria and Ma as well.

The two mages strode toward each other until they were close enough to spit upon one another, were either undignified enough (they were not) to do so.

The Black Man raised his arms.

Vergil drew his sword. The sword with no name.

It was no easy thing for a sword to avoid acquisition of a name. The least trait or incident would suffice. Dost whistle when swung in the air? Deathsminstrel. Born in the forges of Caliburnus? Excaliburn. Left it leaning on the outside of the tavern on the sunniest day of the year and came out not more than three drinks later to find it all a-rust? Stormbringer.

Vergil had overseen the forging of the blade himself, the work done by a blacksmith mute from birth, and when one of the apprentices had cried out on its emergence from the cooling bath (it was a stock sales technique; *let the mark leave happy* being a byword of greatmost antiquity), "Ah! 'Tis a very—" "wonder" he was about to say, or "marvel," and there 'twould've been, Wonderblade or Wizard's Marvelment, when the magus's fist in the hollow of his stomach had cut short the thought.

"Thank you," the mage had said. "I'll take it."

It was important that this be a sword without a name, for if Vergil were to occasionally find himself wearing such a thing during his researches (in a situation, say, where his professional and pseudoregal duties coincided), why then, it were wisest that the blade were alchemically neutral. There was magical power in names. And in this sword, none.

Vergil swung up the explicitly un-magical sword. The Black Man flung his arms out to either side, fingers wriggling like snakes, to turn his magics against him. For what use had a magus of a sword? Well, a hundred actually. All of them powerfully magical. None of which involved a straightforward stab into his enemy's chest.

Blood gushed.

"Oh," said the Black Man.

He fell forward.

Dead.

In the stunned silence, Vergil turned to Count Mar, who stood suddenly exposed by the fall of his champion. The old count did not return his look with any great enthusiasm. "You," said the magus, sternly. "Lord Mar. What earthly reason do you have for this unprovoked attack upon me?"

"I . . . well . . . of course . . ." The Count flapped a hand toward his Countess, his wife, Oria. "The . . . ah . . . the insult . . . to the honor . . . of . . . my wife?" he ended weakly.

"For jealousy?" Oria said. "You tried to kill King Vergil for *me?*" She ran forward and flung her arms about the neck of Emericho, Count Mar, Master of Ceremonies to the Court, her husband. "Oh, 'Rico!" she squealed. "You *darling* man!" And to his absolute befuddlement, kissed him then and there.

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She was a girl who knew which side her bed was buttered on, was Oria.

So there it was: Hero triumphant, villain dead in the dust, and now the clinch: the two lovers reunited. And if one were a trifle old for the role, well. One can't have everything. To a man and woman, the bystanders cheered, whistled, stamped, and threw their caps in the air. They might not know exactly what had just happened. But they knew a good story when they saw it.

Count Mar then set his wife, Oria, Countess Mar, to one side and, with the astonishing assurance of the Old Aristocracy, took Vergil's arm and led him aside. "This is a touch embarrassing, old boy, but I'm certain you in your professional capacity as a wizard and negromancer will of course . . . well, to put it bluntly, one finds oneself in need of a yerb or potion, something that will—as the saying goes—put some lead in the old stylus.

"For a friend, you understand," he added quickly. "Not for one's self."

A King Without Country had many responsibilities, as many, indeed, as the Emperor in his wisdom might choose to heap upon his shoulders. Withal, he could not levy taxes, nor raise troops. Neither could he set policy nor declare war. He had not the powers of High nor Low justice, could practice neither infangthief upon criminal villeins, nor outfangthief upon suspicious-looking vagabonds, could not condemn a felon, nor imprison a traitor, nor e'en so much as *fine* a citizen, be the rascal never so annoying to endure. He could not aspire to the office of Emperor.

What advantage then, when all is said and done, hath a King?

Ans.: A King may forgive.

"I have," Vergil admitted, "just the thing."

Of a night not many months after, Vergil met with a certain Lady, incognito, at a small farmhouse in the Libertiex of Etruscany. The Lady was accompanied by her aged crone of a mother and a ragged varlet with emblems of the Vavaseur of Idalia whom Vergil did not recognize, for he had never before laid eyes upon the man. Vergil was accompanied only by his unshakable Chinese wizard. "So she's tupped-up, is she?" said the Lady, when he was done his tale, wiping tears of laughter from the corners of her eyes.

"Most gracious Imperial Maj—" he began.

"Call me Aunt Pet," she said. "They all does."

"Aunt Pet. Yes, she is. Pregnant."

Her eyes narrowed. "Ye're not gawna try nor conwince me it were *Mar's* doing? I'se not so provincial as all *that!* I don't care how much lead thee puts in an eighty-year-old stylus, t'ain't gwinter write no such nonsense."

"No, Maj—Aunt Pet. The child is the work of your husband, the Emperor."

She wheezed with laughter, and slapped her thigh thunderously. "Well, b'ain't that just like him! As ready to rut as a goat! I remember a time when—"

Patiently, Vergil endured a ribald tale the single repetition of which in the Eternal City would be worth his head and the pole upon which it would be stuck. Standards were different out here in the country, of course. Then he said:

"Aunt Pet, I would there were peace between us."

"Why, lor bless you, why shouldn't there be?"

"You convinced Count Mar to hire the Black Man to kill me. I thought you might have had some reason."

Aunt Pet blushed.

"Mummsy," she said gently, "why don't you go with that nice Chinee-man,

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the Babylonian or whatever. Have him show you how to fix up someat magical from his little boxy-thingie, eh?"

Then, when the reverenced hag had dragged young Ma off to the kitchen, she lowered her voice confidentially.

"It's me mother. The Imperatrix-Mum. *Her*." She gestured with a nod of her head. "She enjoys a spot of court intrigue, so we keeps a few spies, traitors, assassins, and so on, on the payroll. Just so she can keep a hand in—it means so much to her, old dear!" She lowered her voice. "They none of them does any *real* spyin'. Just sits in Rome on the expense account, boozin an whorin an guzzlin an makin up lies to send home." Then, raising her voice, "All save for one wha's too *dim* to understand that when it's raining soup, ye holds out yer skirt."

She glared at the varlet who shivered and hunkered further down into himself.

To break the tension, Vergil said, "One more question. Just who is the Vavaseur of Idalia?"

She clucked her tongue. "Why, bless you, sweets, *I* is! It's a hobby I has. I collects titles. Big ones, little ones. I has one of each by now, I reckon. I don't fancy it costs dear Festus nothing."

Which pretty much wound up everything Vergil had come to ask. It would be impolite, though, to leave so abruptly. Also dangerous. The lady was still the Empress, and it was night, and there were (doubtless) wolves. So Vergil stayed, and talked, and listened. It was surprisingly pleasant to deal solely with inconsequalia for a change. Even a King (even One Without Country) can enjoy a touch of gossip.

After a time they began to speculate on the sex of the Emperor's forthcoming bastard. Not that it mattered to the Emperor, he had dozens of the things, one more was simply one more, and rumor had it he was growing tired of Oria (and why else would she have arranged for the child otherwise?) anyway. But for Lord Mar, who yearned for the continuation of House Mar *by whatever means necessary,* as the saying goes (nor would it be the first time the blood of the Old Aristocracy had been thus refreshed by intercession of the Emperor), and for Oria, who had gone through so much to acquire an heir, it made an enormous difference whether she whelped a boy who could inherit the name *and estates* of Mar, or a girl, who could not.

"An she were here," said Petronella, "I could tell by looking in her een. They always shows there, boy or girl."

A shiver went up Vergil's spine, for occulomancy was an old witch's trick, and he remembered stories he had heard about the Empress's past. Weaving . . . how was it the revered sage of Terra Incognita Occidentalis had phrased it, a passing reference in a long conversation through a brass tube that had occurred years after the man's ostensible death? . . . "weaving counter-spells against the witcheries of the Petchenegs and Scotes . . ." *Some*thing like that.

And with that the last piece of the puzzle fell into place.

The Black Man had refused his offer of money because his pedigree was insufficiently old. Whose, then, *could* he respect? Not Count Mar, who was (by the Black Man's standards) something of an upstart.

Some titles, however, were older than Rome. Older than civilization. Older than anything that can be named.

He cast a sharper look at the creature he had at first taken for some mongrel breed of lap-puppy and now recognized to be no such thing. No such an-

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imal as this was existed. On this world, anyway. Such creatures existed on the physical plane only as familiars.

Quickly, Vergil slid from his stool onto a single knee. "Eldest," he whispered, and then a word of homage in a tongue that not a dozen men alive could speak.

"Hush," Petronella said sharply. "Sit back down, thee. Have a hazzlenut. Festy sent me a bushel just last calends. Should be some not rotted yet."

This line of conversation was interrupted by the abrupt reappearance of Ma. He carried a cup of the same steaming suffusion with which he had earlier unraveled the knot of knowing that had so bound Vergil. He thrust it at Aunt Pet.

"You wish to know about child," he said. "Drink."

Horrified, Vergil reached to stop the royal hand. But it went, instead, to a nearby honey-pot (it was the honey of thyme, not clover-honey or wildflower-honey; there was in Idalia no lack of thyme), there to dip a spoon and stir, once, twice, thrice, and up. A golden glob of sweet and amber-brown honey came up with it, and descended into the drink. Her majesty stirred, set aside the spoon, tasted.

"Nowt half bad," she decided. "Might go nice with a touch of cream."

The Chinese wizard waited until the cup was near-done. Then he took it back, and before Aunt Pet's shrewd eyes gone suddenly gullible, swirled the liquid in the cup around and around. In which instant Vergil saw, with an intuitive occulomantic leap of his own, that among the next basket of trinkets and favors to be begged of the Emp. Festus IV, would be one requesting the custodianship of a certain young outland magician.

With a crisp turn of his wrist, Ma snapped the cup down onto the table. He lifted it away.

They all of them, even including the Varlet to the V. of I., leaned low over the leaves. Such is the miracle of a child's birth that, though it happens every day a thousand thousand times over, interest in it never dims. The wonder is ever-green.

The Chinese wizard spread his hands in joy. "A boy," he said. "A boy!" ●

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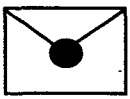

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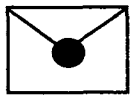

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Leslie What

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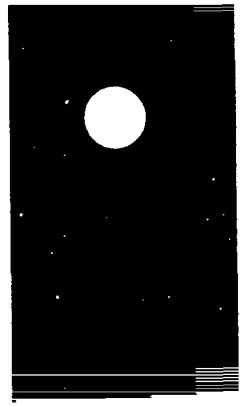
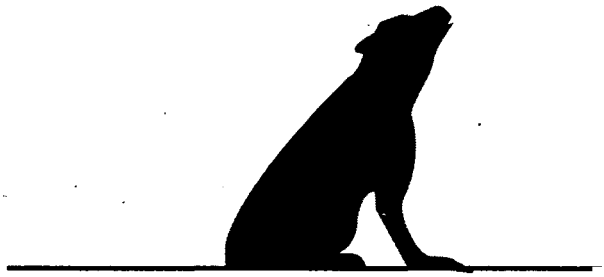


Leslie What's stories have appeared in *Asimov's, Hysteria, F&SF, Lilith Fiction Quarterly,* and other magazines, journals, and anthologies. She tells us, "Whatworld can be viewed at: http://www.sff.net/people/leslie.what."



"Down on all fours!" shouted Buzz, the owner of *Buzz Raptor's Exotic Pet Agency.* He was portly and bald, inelegantly dressed in pleated pants and a red bowling shirt, his name in yellow thread embroidered on the pocket. "Let me hear you say 'woof.'" Buzz climbed atop his desk to give Olivia a demonstration howl.

Olivia dropped to the ground. "Woof," she barked. This had to be the weirdest employment interview of her life. But being shy, depressed, and huge enough to be scary had many times hindered her ability to find acting jobs, so the least she could do was be cooperative.

"You must work out," said Buzz appreciatively.

Olivia nodded. At the moment she was muscular and very strong, having toned down to a comfortable weight of two hundred twenty pounds. She rather liked herself this way. Her hair was dyed black and she wore a studded leather vest and pants, accessorized with a silver chain choker. She looked tough. Working as a temporary pet would be a step down from her last position as a bouncer at Larry's Leather, but she needed money. She barked several times, as if Buzz didn't already know that she was desperate.

Behind Buzz's desk was a wall of shelves. Most of the space in the small office was taken up by a wire-fence kennel. Inside the kennel, a scrawny

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woman in a white fur bodysuit ran furiously around a giant hamster wheel. The hamster woman paused every now and again to check her weight on an electronic scale before hopping back on the wheel. Not a bad job for an anorexic. Olivia waved to her, though the hamster woman seemed oblivious to anything but her wheel and her burlap sack of sunflower seeds.

"So, snarl, already!" said Buzz. "And put some lip into it."

Olivia showed off her best snarl and took what she hoped was a threatening step forward.

"My gawd!" said Buzz, thumping his hand against his chest. "You give me shivers. You're *that* good, girl!" he said. "You ever been on Broadway?"

She felt her face glow warm with pride. It had been ages since a man had complimented her.

Buzz jumped off his desk to shake her hand. His palms, not surprisingly, were sweaty. "Absolutely perfect!" he said. "And me, ready to give up hope. You're the first bitch I've had all day who could pass for Rottweiler! You've got 'watch dog' written all over you."

"How much does it pay?"

"A hefty bit more than some kibble and two-bits," Buzz promised with a wink. "'Course, without an equity card, I can't pay you scale."

He gave her a W-4. "I see you come with your own collar," said Buzz, pointing to Olivia's chain choker. "I can give you a credit for that." He pulled a boxed uniform from the shelf. "Deposit of three hundred taken from your first check. Refundable, of course. You're paid on the second and fourth Friday of the month. You agree that any tips will be split fifty-fifty with the house. I'll nail on taps for your shoes so you'll make noise on the kitchen floor—makes you sound like you got toenails that need clipping. A nice touch." He pointed to a folding screen propped against the wall. "There's the dressing room. I'll issue your dog tags and license while you change."

Olivia set up the screen, then stood behind it. She took off her things and gathered the sleek black fur suit above her feet, then pulled it gently over her legs. The zipper ran from crotch to neck. She smoothed the hood over her head and worked with the ears until they stood up straight. She brought her street clothes around to the desk.

"You won't be needing those for a while," Buzz said. He gave her a claim check and tossed the clothes to the floor.

The dog suit felt very nice; fitting snugly, as if it had been custom made for her. She rubbed the fur on her arm with one hand, rubbed both thighs, and touched the back of her neck.

"How's it feel being a licensed professional?" said Buzz, handing her a dog tag. *Checkers* was engraved on one side, Buzz's pager number on the other.

Olivia inquired about the name, hoping she didn't sound too ungrateful.

"She's old—the lady who's hiring you. *Checkers* has sentimental value. Think of it as a code word for loyalty. I mean, the money's great . . . you live rent-free in a luxury condo at Riverplace. You want more than that? I don't got it." He brought his thumb and forefinger down his double chin like he was pulling taffy. "Still," he said, "I never make my girls work where they don't feel comfortable. They need a guard dog over at Lars' Scrapyard. Graveyard shift."

"No," said Olivia. "This will be fine."

Buzz pointed to a calendar on the wall. "Play your cards right, you could make Pet of the Month," he said.

She squinted at the green-eyed beauty in the shiny python suit. Ms. Janu-

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ary's pink tongue seductively tasted the air; her fluid body was wrapped tightly around her prey. On closer inspection, that turned out to be Buzz. Olivia shuddered.

"Remember," Buzz said, giving her a thumbs up. "Loyalty." He handed her his card with an address scrawled across it, and held out a worn employee manual. "Try not to lose your humanity," he said, with a wink toward the hamster. "Not as easy as it sounds." For a moment he looked as if he might cry. "Had a man go over last quarter. Forgot he was playing a part. Thought he was a real alligator. Ate my client. Nasty business. Nasty. Almost ruined me." Solemnly, he grasped her shoulders. "The second it stops feeling like an act, you call. Understand?"

Olivia nodded, then left. As she walked toward the river she read the introductory notes in the manual, then skipped to the section called *Tricks of the Trade.* "Whenever you see your master make him believe you've spent your entire day—better yet, your entire life—waiting for this moment!" She perused the chapter on behavior. "While on duty, bark once for food and twice to be let out." Another chapter, *Devotion Is Its Own Reward,* taught her to twitch her legs when her belly was scratched. The job seemed less and less bizarre.

The little old lady, a widow named Mrs. Waverly, was obviously in great need of companionship. She explained to Olivia that she was somewhat hard-of-hearing, and that her previous dog, a natural cocker spaniel with uncontrollable halitosis, had only recently passed away. "I've been so lonely, Checkers," she said. "There are times I can hardly sleep at night."

Olivia clumsily bent her knees and bowed to let Mrs. Waverly pet her head. She helped Mrs. Waverly make up a soft pad next to her own bed and watched as the old lady set out clean bowls filled with water and chopped sirloin. "You cooked for me?" asked Olivia.

Mrs. Waverly shushed her. "I'm going to let this go, seeing as you're new. Checkers, you're a dog now. No more talking!" she said.

"Woof," said Olivia. She sat on her new bed and scratched herself behind one ear.

Mrs. Waverly said, "Good dog," and gave her a biscuit hard as cast iron.

Olivia could not remember ever being this content. In the morning, she fetched the paper and dropped it in front of the old lady's feet. In the afternoon, she barked at the mailman and bit the UPS driver when he tried to leave a package at the door. In the evening, Mrs. Waverly scratched her belly for almost an hour.

"Except for dog poop you're quite realistic," said Mrs. Waverly. "Don't get me wrong! I don't miss *it* or the fleas!" She was so kindly and considerate that it wasn't long before Olivia looked upon her as a grandmother. Mrs. Waverly's only flaw was her bad habit of giving out too many biscuits without demanding a trick in return. By the end of the first week Olivia noticed her dog suit had grown snug in the crotch. She vowed to get back into shape; she could stand being big as long as she was strong.

With leash in mouth, she scratched at the door.

"Aren't you the perky one?" said Mrs. Waverly. "I'll just get my clutch and we'll be off." They trotted outside. Mrs. Waverly said, "Once around the building should do it," but Olivia dug in her heels and strained against her leash. She held out for the jogging trail at Riverside Park.

"Oh, you stubborn thing," said Mrs. Waverly. "Well, okay. Let's go to the park."

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Olivia broke into a jog the second they reached the sawdust trail. The old lady tried to keep up, but after a hundred paces, she dropped the leash and said in an out-of-breath voice, "Go on without me, Checkers."

Olivia watched Mrs. Waverly sink onto a park bench to fan her brow, then ran five miles before returning. Mrs. Waverly was waiting on the bench, pretending not to notice the scruffy midget in a white, rough-coat dog suit who sweated and grunted as he humped her left leg.

"What are you, some sort of terrier?" growled Olivia. She bared her teeth, but didn't snap.

"A Dandie Dinmont," said the fellow, seeming quite proud of himself.

He was perfectly disgusting. She growled and opened her eyes wide so that the whites would show. She foamed at the mouth, and leapt toward him.

"That's enough! Down, girl!" ordered Mrs. Waverly in an angry voice. She boxed Olivia's ear.

Olivia whimpered, and hung her head in shame.

"Sorry about all this," said the terrier's owner, a man wearing a double-breasted suit. "Been meaning to get him fixed." At that, the Dandie Dinmont yelped and took a few steps backward.

"He's an adorable little pup," said Mrs. Waverly with a sigh.

From then on, Mrs. Waverly instigated their walks. She conveniently dropped the leash at about the same spot near the bench every day, ordering Olivia to run on alone. Olivia wasn't sure she liked this tactic. On the plus side, she lost a few pounds and her leg muscles became hard as biscuits. She tried not to be jealous of the Dandie Dinmont, though whenever she saw him, a growl escaped her lips. Mrs. Waverly seemed to call her "bad dog" more than she called her "Checkers."

Olivia was finding it difficult to contain her growing resentment. The repetition that had once seemed comforting now caused boredom. The menu never varied: water and unseasoned chopped sirloin. The clip clop of her toes across the floor gave her a headache. One night, she refused Mrs. Waverly's cajoling to be licked on the face. Mrs. Waverly punished her by sending her to bed without a biscuit.

The next afternoon, as Mrs. Waverly watched a syndicated rerun of *Frasier,* laughing especially hard when the little dog came onstage, Olivia wondered if she might be depressed. She called the vet, who assured her it was normal to spend large parts of her day napping. She called Buzz to ask if he had any other jobs, but he reminded her she still owed fifty dollars on the suit. In agony, she hung her head out the window and howled at the moon.

"I don't need your moping, you bad dog," said Mrs. Waverly after dinner. "Take the night off." She gave Olivia ten dollars and directions to a neighborhood bar. "Go get drunk, why don't you?" she said.

Olivia carried the money in her mouth. She jogged to the bar, but when she arrived, a familiar feeling of timidity overwhelmed her. She did her best to blend into the woodwork. This was much easier than she might have guessed, considering her size and the fact that she was wearing a dog suit. She sat at the bar and tried to order a Black and White, but the bartender said to slow down, that he could not understand her woofing. A smart-aleck in a loose green bird suit sat beside her, and introduced himself as Paulo. The music was so loud she didn't catch his last name. In his squawky voice he told the bartender to bring them both drinks.

When she spit out the wad of green, Paulo waved his hand and said, "I don't want your money. Please."

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She smiled and barked her thanks. He seemed to understand every nuance of her voice.

"Shall we dance?" he asked, and she agreed. He stood several inches shorter than she, and was walking stick-skinny, with pale, almost translucent skin. He danced across the dance floor like a cloud wafting across sky. He let her spin him around a time or two. She realized with a blush that she could easily lift him up and carry him out the door anytime she wanted. She wanted that very much right now. Her face felt hot with embarrassment and longing. He asked what was wrong, and she confessed her thoughts.

"Why don't you?" he said, with a gap-toothed smile, so she did.

He took her to his place. Paulo worked as a parrot for a nearsighted professor in Southeast, who was away birding at the moment on an overnighter with the Audubon Society. The poor professor was a widower, a bird enthusiast who was severely allergic to mites and dander. All that flying around the house had sculpted Paulo's pectorals into unbelievable shape, considering. When she flexed her own muscles for Paulo he whistled. His whistle was the most beautiful music she had ever heard.

They sat on a swing in his bird cage and talked for what seemed like hours. They kissed good night, and just before breaking apart, Paulo let his hand slide from her shoulder to the small of her back and then downward to her buttocks. A shiver ran from the base of her spine up to her neck as he gently petted her fur. She blew a kiss against his neck, a symbolic ruffling of his feathers. Reluctantly, she left for home.

He called the next morning.

Mrs. Waverly seemed upset, but let Olivia use the phone, though she wiped down the receiver with alcohol after.

Olivia had arranged to meet Paulo at the park. On their walk, Mrs. Waverly dropped the leash near the bench. Instead of her usual resentment, Olivia felt a lightness flowing through her. She ran forward and spotted Paulo. They fell upon each other, and rolled across the jogging track. She got a sawdust burn on her behind, but kissing him was worth it.

Maybe people needed pets for the same reason people needed to be pets—because they couldn't bear to be alone, yet couldn't bear to be with other people. Her feelings for Paulo frightened her, but he was so persistent, she so needy, that she could not hold them back. She told him her real name.

She began to suspect Mrs. Waverly had stopped caring for her after the biscuit jar ran dry and wasn't refilled. Her suspicions were confirmed when the chopped sirloin degraded into ground round—15 percent—and soon after to canned Iams, then Purina, then the store brand. One morning, as Olivia lay on her mattress lazily snapping at flies, Mrs. Waverly sneaked up beside her and smacked her rump with the paper. It all happened so quickly there was no time to react.

"Buzz says I can't put you down or I would," said Mrs. Waverly. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave."

Her woof failed her; she resorted to words. "But why?" asked Olivia.

"Let's just say I want something a little smaller and cuter," said Mrs. Waverly.

Olivia understood that she was talking about the Dandie Dinmont. That hurt, badly enough that when Mrs. Waverly wasn't looking, Olivia peed in one of her fuzzy pink slippers. She left a message on Buzz's voice mail, saying she'd be in touch, and walked out the door. She stood on the sidewalk, unsure

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of which way to go. She was an actress! Not a possession to be discarded. In a flash of anger, she found herself chasing a grey squirrel into the street. She watched with horror as the little beast was run down by a car.

Tears would not come to her; she howled inconsolably. A man walked by and yelled at her to be quiet. She crept down an alley to look for food in the garbage bins, and there she found a half-eaten Polish sausage, a package of oyster crackers, and a sliver of leather from an old wallet. She bit down on the leather and trotted away to the park. Curling up beneath the park bench, she chewed the leather into mush. Eventually, she fell asleep.

She awakened to the sound of her name, and saw Paulo flitting through the brush. He called out to her. She did not mean to answer, but instinct took over. "Woof," she said. "Woof."

On the cab ride over to his place she broke down and told him what had happened. "Woof," she said—I'm so ashamed.

He told her not to worry, then hugged her and let her pull him onto her lap. When they arrived, Paulo asked her to remove her tap shoes so as not to disturb the professor. He led her to his cage.

"What will become of me?" she asked.

"I'll ask the professor to hire you so we can stay together," Paulo said.

"You'll ask me what?" said a grey-haired man in a satin smoking jacket and paisley pajama bottoms. "And what's all this commotion?"

Paulo explained Olivia's predicament. It was obvious that the professor didn't like the idea of hiring her, though he begrudgingly said okay. "Except I don't care for dogs," he said. "Cats and birds okay, but no dogs."

Olivia nodded and tried to purr. A good thing she had studied method acting. In the morning, she visited Buzz to trade in her Rottweiler suit for a Coon cat's. She had a bit of trouble managing the tail-swishing thing, but vowed to do her best because of her affection for Paulo. She found it surprisingly easy to get into character. She chased Paulo around the house, batting him with her long arms and gently biting his behind when she caught him. She spit the feathers from her mouth and he gave her a wicked smile.

"I love you," Paulo said. "I want to marry you."

She followed him into the bird cage and he closed the latch and pulled down the ends of the cage cover. For the first time in her life, she experienced the secrets and the glory beneath a man's bird suit.

Unfortunately, the professor walked in on them. He sprayed them both with water from his mister. "This is all quite unprofessional," he said, averting his eyes. "Even for actors. You're fired."

But Paulo said, "You can't fire me! I quit." He gave his employer the bird and he and Olivia quickly dressed and left the house. "I'm in love!" he warbled. "In love."

Olivia felt deliriously happy. They took a bus to the Coin-Operated Church of Elvis and deposited enough quarters to be married. The happy couple spent their first night of wedded bliss in a nearby Holiday Inn that allowed pets.

"Even a temporary pet deserves dignity!" Olivia said. She and Paulo snuggled in their love nest and talked of opening America's first giant flea circus. They would place ads in *Variety*, hire disgruntled pet workers from across the nation to perform. Perhaps the Dandie Dinmont would apply, and although he was sure to come with excellent references, Olivia smiled, knowing she would refuse to hire him. ●

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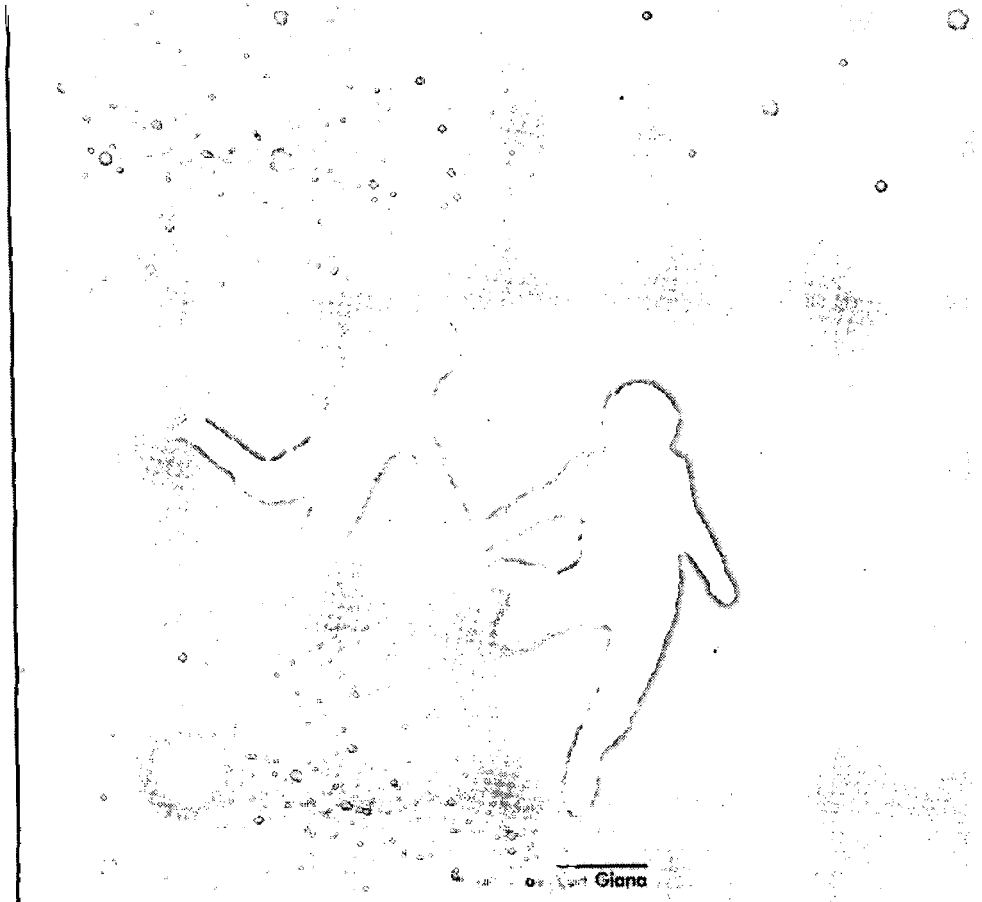
R. Garcia y Robertson

STARFALL

The author of our vibrant cover story has recently published a new novel, *American Woman* (Forge), and a collection of short stories, *The Moon Maid and Other Fantastic Adventures*. Several of the tales in this collection were first published in *Asimov's* —including: "Gypsy Trade" (November 1992), "The Other Magpie" (April 1993), and "Werewolves of Luna" (December 1994). In his latest story of star crashes, space pirates, bug-eyed monsters, sword fights, scantily clad hunks and hologram femmes fatales, Mr. Garcia has truly provided us with another fantastic and rewarding adventure.



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Belt City Blues

A holo walks into a bar. . . . Heard it before? But this is no joke. The bar is real, aboard an orbiting habitat, Belt City, in Orion 3645A, the G-type, A-half of a no-hope Outback double system. All one hundred percent real—even if the holo is not. Or rather, they *were* real. Bar, habitat, and double system all fell victim to a cosmic mishap. So don't do a search for them in any updated *Systems Guide.*

But during the bar's last months in business, a holo did come in. Not just any holo either, a virtual angel on a mercy mission off a ship named *Nightingale.* She had long silvery hair, a honey-sweet voice, caring eyes, and a cheerful absent smile. Being a holo, she did not drink, smoke, kiss, or pet. She had just come to Belt City a bit ahead of herself, to see and to be seen. Hoping to get picked up. Judge for yourself how she did.

Outside, people rioted. Belt City was already doomed, bringing civic functions to a halt. Somehow slidewalks ran and air got recycled, but little else got done. Anyone with a gram of sense—anyone who planned for their future—fought like hell to get aboard a ship headed outsystem.

Bypassing the jammed starport, the holo beamed straight to the Danse Macabre, on the Belt's high-g level, timing her signal so that she stepped casually out of the wall. Less vulgar than flickering into being in some stranger's face. And this holo hated being vulgar. She had serious things to do.

The upcoming end of the world had exploded the bar scene. If you're doomed, don't waste it. Worried about health or credit? That was for folks with hope. The whole double system had no future to fear or look forward to. People packed the Danse Macabre, so desperate for pleasure that even a holo could turn heads. In fact, being an offworlder was a plus. A ticket outsystem had become the ultimate aphrodisiac. Which was one reason why she projected herself wearing ship's clothes, the sort of loose tasteful outfit supplied to passengers. With the *Nightingale*'s starbird-in-flight logo at her throat, she just had to stand and survey the scene to get immediate attention.

"Hey, you're looking awfully adequate."

The holo turned slowly. The guy accosting her was flesh-and-blood, and looking pretty adequate as well, with dark eyes, biosculpted cheekbones, and long insolent lashes. He wore a torso-suit of clinging chrome fabric, leaving no room for imagination. "New to the Belt?" he asked. "I'm called Anton."

Speed-of-light delay made her take her time answering—as if she were overly thoughtful, or not too swift. *Nightingale* was still over a light-second out. "Tiffany," she told him. "Tiffany Panic."

Anton grinned. "Great name."

She thanked him gravely. "My parents' idea."

"So, are you slow-witted? Or just somewhere far away?"

Tiffany gave a lazy shrug. "You know what they say about blondes." She liked his boldness. Anton looked good, even from half a million klicks. But Tiffany had not come looking for the usual you-show-me-I'll-show-you virtual date.

"Incoming or outgoing?"

"Incoming."

"Headed where?" Anton looked her over, trying to gauge how much of what he saw was real. Hard to tell with a holo. "Maybe I can get you there."

"Maybe you could." Tiffany very much needed someone to get her where

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she had to go. Anton might be that someone—he sure acted like he was. Her sensors agreed. Heartbeat, voice modulation, GSR, and pupil dilation all told her Anton was more than willing, thoroughly interested in her. Ready to take risks.

"You name it, I've been there. From Belt City to the edge of the Beyond."

"It's not technically insystem," Tiffany admitted.

"Oh?" He raised an eyebrow. "Where is it?"

"Floreal."

Anton's face fell. Indicators tumbled. He glanced at the packed bar beyond her, unconsciously searching for something better. Turning back to Tiffany, his smile had shrunk several centimeters. "So, how about your berth outsystem?" Clearly *she* would not be needing it.

"Only if you get me to Floreal."

Anton took his act elsewhere. Tiffany attracted more attention, but interest faded whenever she mentioned Floreal. The better they looked, the faster the brush-off. She started feeling like damaged goods, too deranged even for a dying system.

The Danse Macabre lived up to its name. Distracted dancers jerked listlessly, like broken toys, mimicking offworld steps light years out-of-date, all to local lyrics. "Got no feeling, got no future, got no where to go. . . ." No outrage, no remorse, just old news.

Tiffany watched a couple dancing in place. The boy was a Choctaw, in leather and body paint, head half-shaved, hair pulled to the side. His gaze stayed hard, casing the bar over his girlfriend's bare shoulder, keeping his thigh moving between her legs. His girl was young, a slinky-haired waif, looking wise and woebegone, growing up ahead of her time. Matching her boyfriend's indifferent movements, she molded to his body, laying her head on his shoulder, wrapping a leg around his calf. Losing herself in him. Knowing her odds against getting to adulthood were just shy of astronomical.

Tiffany's heart went out to her. She had been to hardluck systems before, but she could not look at that sad-eyed girl without desperately hoping to even the odds. Even holos could feel. Sometimes.

"No luck, honey?"

Tiffany turned again. She faced a woman this time, very much in the flesh, with a wild mane of red hair and fine worry lines around her eyes. Maybe twice as old as she looked, she wore a v-shaped jacket with a plunging neckline, held in place by enhanced anatomy. Her half-boots had steel toes. Glitter pants looked sprayed on.

Tiffany nodded slowly. No sense denying the obvious.

"I can get you to where you want to go." The redhead said it like she meant it. Sensors agreed.

"Floreal?"

"Sure. If that is where you aim to be." Fancy pants did not think much of that destination. Nobody did. She flicked open a silver compact with a lacquered nail, extracting a mildly narcotic cigarette. Snapping the compact shut, she shoved it into a big purse matching her jacket. "No sweat."

"How?" Tiffany felt cautious optimism. Sensors said the top-heavy redhead in a plunging jacket and sprayed-on pants was telling the truth. Or at least believed that she was.

"I've got a friend." She tapped the cigarette against the bar and it lit itself. She took a long drag, then blew sweet opiated smoke through Tiffany. "Call me Faith."

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"Tiffany. Tiffany Panic."

"So I hear. Where you beamed from?"

"Rescue ship *Nightingale*. Inbound for Belt City, half a million klicks out. ETA 01:53:20 tomorrow A.M."

"Glad to meet you." Sensors said that was the truth. Faith was delighted to have found Tiffany. She nodded at the door. "Let's go."

Tiffany followed her out. Faith hopped a slow slidewalk headed spinward, and set off in the direction of motion, using long thigh-showing strides. Tiffany followed in her wake, until the moving strip got too crowded, forcing Faith to hold up.

A trio of topknotted Jutes, two boys and a girl, blocked further progress, sitting atop a pile of cartons, mostly stolen holocams and headsets. Farther down the slidewalk a family had set up housekeeping. Belt City was full to bursting with newcomers fleeing the smaller habitats. Gray tubeway slid slowly past, broken by bar fronts and holo arcades. People got on and off.

One of the Jutes called out, "What will you give for a super-V synthesizer?"

"Never been used," his buddy boasted.

"Newly boosted," the girl added hopefully.

Faith took a disinterested drag, shifting her purse to the far side of her body. Turning toward Tiffany, she kept watch on the Jutes out the corner of her eye. No wonder she had worry lines. The disaster overtaking the double system was not even Faith's most pressing problem. A lot of folks would never live to see doomsday.

Both boys got up and sauntered over, leaving the girl to watch their loot. She was leashed to the slidewalk by a chrome chain. Faith's free hand slid inside her purse.

"You could have fun with a top of the line synthesizer," the first Jute suggested. He wore broad black and green vertical body stripes, matching his half-tights and black leather codpiece.

"We could all have fun," his buddy added. He passed a hand through Tiffany and both of them laughed. "Your friend can watch."

Tiffany felt helpless. All she *could* do was watch. She was a trained diplomat, but appealing to their better natures seemed pointless, especially when she talked like a half-wit. Distance and speed-of-light lag made her reactions impossibly slow. Like living in slow mode, with the signal off-sync. Looking about, she saw the slidewalk rapidly empty—aside from the huddled family, who clearly had nowhere to go. Kids peeked out from behind their elders, staring wide-eyed at what was about to happen. Police protection had become wildly intermittent. Faith had to field this on her own.

The Jutes edged in. "Look, if you are saving yourself for someone better—don't bother."

"It's now or never." His buddy patted a spitshined codpiece. Belt City had gone way beyond being a waking nightmare, becoming the adolescent dream come true—no jobs, no cops, no future, school out for good, and everything free for the taking.

A black-green hand seized Faith's sleeve, "Let's see what's holding up that jacket."

Faith sighed, took a last drag on her dopestick, then flicked the butt in the nearest Jute's face. He staggered back. Her hand came out of her purse holding a professional-strength repellent can. Thumbing the nozzle to wide-angle spray, she doused them both.

Instantly they doubled up, gagging and writhing, eyes clinched in blind

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agony. Two steel-toed kicks sent them sprawling. Limbs spasming, they flopped about doing dry heaves, weeping and coughing on the slidewalk. Holding a hand over his face, one struggled to his knees, waving her off. "Shit, lady. It was just a suggestion."

"Then take that as a no." Faith kept the can between her and them. The girl left with their goods laughed out loud. Except for the leash, and a ring in her navel, she dressed just like the boys who owned her—minus the codpiece. Pert young nipples showed through her paint.

Tiffany whistled softly, "Well done." Unsure how she would have handled the two thugs, she felt frightened at what she was getting into. Diplomatic training made her too diffident. Too willing to see the other side. It was not too late to back out. She was still only a holo.

Faith shrugged. "I'm trying not to make a career of it."

They got off at the first spoke. A lift took them to the Belt's low-g hub. The insystem side of the hub seemed deserted, especially compared to the packed starport. Faith thumbed a rental locker. The door sprang open, and she exchanged her purse for a vacuum suit. Suiting up, she told a nearby lock to cycle.

Tiffany entered the lock as is. Being a holo, she was not concerned about lack of oxygen, or drops in pressure. The lock cycled, and Faith stepped out onto the outside of the hub, telling her boots to grip.

So far Tiffany had seen and heard through sensors built into the fabric of Belt Cit—the same holocams and readouts that projected her moving image. Beyond the lock lay empty space. She could still hear through Faith's suit comlink, but cams were few and far between. Her image flickered out as soon as Faith left the lock.

Fortunately, the vast empty void outside never changed much. Even from aboard the *Nightingale,* a light-second away, Tiffany knew what Faith was seeing. She saw it herself. Orion 3645A sat at the ragged edge of a dense star cluster. Suns blazed down from all directions, backlit by the Orion Nebula, great neon fingers of gas stretching across the light years. Inside them, yet more stars were being born.

Upsun from the hub hung the lesser half of the double system, Orion 3645B, a red dwarf. The biggest star in the sky was a white giant, Orion 4673, rushing insystem at phenomenal speed. In less than two standard years, this speeding giant would slam through the double system, tearing it apart. Projections showed that the white giant would strip away Orion 3645A's planets and companion. Giant and red companion would spin off in one direction, forming a new double system, Orion 4673AB. Orion 3645 would ricochet away at a right angle, becoming a lone G-type star.

By then, Belt City and every other habitable part of the double system would be torn to pieces by tidal forces. Anyone who could not get away would be spaced or fried.

Faith strapped herself into a chemical scooter sitting by the lock. Plugging her suit connections into the seat back, she engaged the gyros, adjusted engine attitude, then fired the thrusters. The scooter surged off toward the sea of stars.

"Following me?" Faith asked.

"Five-by-five." Tiffany did not have to project a holo image to keep track of the scooter.

Down orbit from the hub lay a ship graveyard—everything from gutted hulks to perfectly good low-boost ships, abandoned because they could not get

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outsystem ahead of the maelstrom. The stellar deviation that doomed the double system had been discovered long ago. But when doomsday was centuries off, few had cared. Only when it was decades away did people start to panic. By then it was clear there would never be enough ship-space to evacuate everyone. Even with death hanging over their heads, people reproduced faster than ships could be built.

The scooter passed ship after ship, huge mass-drivers, little one-seat fliers, spider-like landers, spherical cargo ships, and orbital shuttles. Anything with a hope of making it outsystem was long gone. Faith decelerated. Drawing even with a fancy low-boost orbital yacht, she gave a last tap with her thrusters, bringing the scooter to a stop. *Archangel* was stenciled on the sleek hull.

"Turn on the sensors," Faith signaled. "We've got a guest." She docked the scooter, and entered, Tiffany's holo image materializing beside her in the lock. The inner door opened.

Opulence was Tiffany's first impression. The *Archangel*'s saloon-galley had the look and smell of tooled leather, reflected in infinite depth by deck-to-ceiling mirrors. Picasso pen-and-inks were spaced around the upholstered bulkheads—strong simple line drawings of women and bulls. Not prints or holos, but originals brought across a thousand light years, preserved under glass since the late pre-Atomic.

Beneath one of them sat a small black-haired young woman, with her back to the leather covered bulkhead. She had an alert look in her dark lively eyes. Leaping up as they entered, she laughed and asked, "Who's the holo?"

Faith unsealed her suit. "Her name is Panic. Tiffany Panic. She's not as slow as she seems—just a ways off."

Tiffany gave an apologetic shrug. Being a holo was harder than it looked. Stripping off her v-suit, Faith grinned, "Tiffany, meet Miko." She gave the suit to Miko, getting a kiss in return.

Miko had a round smiling face, long black hair hanging down to her hips, and white soft-looking skin. Barefoot and nearly naked, she wore broad stretch fabric bands at the breasts and hips, dark material that moved with her, molding to her tiny body. A body so small she had to stand on tiptoes to reach Faith's lips. She hung the v-suit in the empty lock.

"Well, what do you think of her?" Faith asked.

"Do you mean the ship?" For a moment Tiffany had thought Faith meant Miko.

Faith and Miko nodded together, waiting for her answer.

"I'm amazed," Tiffany admitted, dazzled by the *Archangel*'s Aladdin's Cave interior. As plush as the saloon looked, it was still a working part of the spacecraft. It abutted the main air lock, and an auto-galley and wine cellarette stood at the far end, waiting to serve. But the adjacent stateroom was pure living quarters, decked with a shaggy green carpet of dwarf bluegrass. Smelling like spring.

"Right," Faith agreed. "But beneath the glitter, she's just an insystem yacht, with a simple fusion-reaction drive. She'll get you to Floreal—in style—but she hasn't got the legs to go outsystem." Which was why she had been abandoned, along with her priceless Picassos.

Miko looked confused, then stricken. Falling silent, she stared down at her toes, her excitement punctured. Tiffany watched her go from being a bouncy young woman, happy to show off her ship, to looking like a criminal facing capital sentence.

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A lot was happening beneath the surface, and Tiffany could not entirely trust the ship's sensors to separate truth from fiction. Heartbeat, GSR, and voice modulation could be faked, given the proper programming. She had to gamble on her own judgment. "And what do you want in return?"

"Your ticket outsystem." Faith said it lightly, but she might well have asked for keys to the galaxy. It was what everyone wanted. That much was very believable.

Tiffany turned to Miko. "And what about you?"

The small woman shrugged. "I go with the ship." Her hangdog look said that she was hardly likely to be lying.

"She's the pilot," Faith explained. "I inherited this ship from a friend. A good friend. But when you are done—when she's taken you to Floreal—I want Miko to have the ship. She deserves it." Faith was one of those people who found friends in all the right places. Friends that were about to send her outsystem.

"And that's all right with you?" Tiffany wanted to hear Miko say it. Floreal was a sealed-off habitat in the lesser half of the double system, 3645B. A cosmic dead end, orbiting a nameless red dwarf in a system set to be demolished. Going there would take time, time that would be far better spent trying to get outsystem. Whatever Miko's chances were of surviving, going to Floreal made them a lot slimmer. Ship or no ship. In a similar situation, Anton and a dozen like him had shrugged, turned, and not looked back.

Miko glanced from Tiffany to Faith, then back at her bare toes, her anguished look too awfully real to be an act. "Of course. I can take you to Floreal." She looked up at Tiffany, forcing on a smile. "Sure, good-looking. Whatever you say. If you are hollow-headed enough to want to *go,* then I'm the girl to get you there." Miko meant it.

Tiffany liked her already, even trusted her some, though they were meeting under trying circumstances. Miko had a no nonsense "do the right thing" attitude—even if it cost her. Also a touch of gallows humor, always a plus on a kamikaze mission. But did Tiffany dare make life and death decisions based on like, or trust? Well, it wasn't as if she were being deluged with counter offers. Miko was the only one not to take one look and walk. Tiffany had yet to set foot in this screwed-over system, and already she had to stake everything on hope and intuition.

She turned back to Faith. "You're in luck. All I've got to offer is my return berth on the *Nightingale,* leaving as soon as she can load." To keep a starship insystem a second longer than necessary would incite mayhem.

Looters and Wreckers

Next time was for real. No longer a holo, Tiffany dressed for trouble, pulling sturdy ship's coveralls on over her clothes, stuffing gas filters up her nose. Halfway through the midwatch, *Nightingale* docked on the starport side of the hub. Pandemonium erupted. The rescue ship could take only a tiny fraction of the people screaming to get aboard.

The mob at the embarkation gate fell back before tangle-foot bullets and volleys of gas grenades, trampling one another in retreat. But as soon as the gas thinned, the crowd rebounded, rushing the gate with renewed fury. Insane to get aboard an outbound ship. A tight wedge of riot cops and roboguards beat a path through the howling mass with electro-shock truncheons, taking Tiffany with them.

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She had a ship's bag on her shoulder, holding three changes of outfit, plus personal effects, and a non-lethal plastic stinger—as much for moral support as self-defense. If she ended up having to fight, Tiffany didn't much like her chances.

Jutes and Choctaws had taken over the starport. All outsystem lounges, staff areas, and stopover suites were in their hands. They ran baggage claim and the security kiosks. But their main concern was shaking down anyone lucky enough to be headed outsystem. Pay or stay. They killed, maimed, and assaulted in the course of doing business. Or to mark turf, or to maintain their image. Or for the malicious satisfaction of thwarting the more fortunate.

Luckily, Tiffany was headed *in*system, something so unheard of it took everyone by surprise. Insystem lounges were no-man's-land. Incoming slidewalks were barely worth blocking. Faith was the one who had to run the gauntlet of Jutes, Choctaws, freelance footpads, and families begging tickets. Tiffany wished her luck.

Her robo-cop escort hustled Tiffany past crying babies and disbelieving parents, desperate to get where she was coming from. The starport lacked Belt City's chaotic charm. Floor-to-ceiling energy fences snaked through packed lobbies, past people sleeping sitting up. Garbage had not been collected for months. Stuffy, unrecycled air reeked of urine and excrement. Attempting to use a public toilet had become an act of suicidal bravado.

She exited through a Choctaw checkpoint, a gap in an energy fence festooned with shock wire and anti-bomb mesh. Overarmed boys in leather pants and war paint looked through her bag, laughing at her little non-lethal stinger. One of them pocketed it. Their leader scratched his head with the business end of an assault pistol, trying to figure out what to make of her. "You have business in the Belt?"

"Just passing through."

He grinned boyishly, "Ain't we all. Where to?"

"Floreal." That got a good laugh.

Tiffany stared into his mirror shades. "It's true."

The young gunman looked back at her, amazed, puzzled, then saddened, seeing something lovely going to waste. Lowering his recoilless pistol, he turned to the riot cops. "Crazy lady can pass. You can't."

None of the riot cops wanted to pass. They had all been promised outsystem berths. The robo-guards were programmed not to leave the starport.

Turning back to her, the Choctaw's voice softened. "If you change your mind and come back this way—it will cost you." He said it half as a warning, half as an invite. If she wanted to straighten out and submit, he was the boy to see.

Tiffany nodded. "I know."

They painted her face to show she was Choctaw property, then passed her through. Pulling the filter plugs from her nose, she was on her own, one more anonymous inmate in a system careening toward disaster.

Faith had programmed the lock and scooter to take Tiffany's thumb and voice print, and the v-suit was an adult woman's adjustable. Exiting the lock on the insystem side, Tiffany attached her suit to the scooter seat. Belt City's high-g section arched across the void overhead, backed by neon fingers of gas. The angry white eye of Orion 4673 dominated the crowded starscape, hurtling toward the doomed system. Firing up the thrusters, she coasted through the orbital graveyard, hoping she had picked the right ship, and the right pilot.

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Parking her scooter in orbit, she told the *Archangel*'s lock to cycle her though. Miko laughed at the Choctaw paint. "Going native?" Living under a death sentence had not stifled her sense of fun. She had on something colorful and Japanese-looking, a sort of ship's kimono that came only to the knees. "Stow your stuff in the port stateroom. I'll get us hopping."

The port stateroom had the bluegrass carpet. Holographic effects turned the interior into a forest clearing amid tall trees draped with strangler vine. Birds sang in the green canopy. Sunlight splashed down onto the bed and sideboard. Tossing her bag on the bed, Tiffany took a moment to strip off her coveralls, and wash the paint off her face in a rock basin waterfall. Her new digs made the four-star cabin aboard the *Nightingale* seem like a prison cubicle. But beneath all the finery, *Archangel* was still a slowboat, using 3V effects to fight boredom and claustrophobia.

Tiffany stepped back into the leather-lined saloon, with its auto-bar and Picasso pen-and-inks. Tiny gold robot insects with crystal wings and jeweled eyes flitted about the light panels. The comforts of home, and then some. Right now, Faith was sharing Tiffany's four-star cabin with two families of refugees. Some comedown. Not that Faith could complain. Everyone crammed aboard the *Nightingale* was in a holiday mood.

The command cabin was more Spartan, like the cab of a luxury ATV. Simple instruments, soft command couches, plus an attached washroom, minigalley, and sleeping quarters. The crew could live and stand watches without intruding on passenger country.

Archangel's sole crew member grinned as Tiffany entered. "Glad to see you."

Sensors said it was true. Now that they were face-to-face, Tiffany read Miko five-by-five. Heartbeat, GSR, pupil dilation and voice modulation were all analyzed by microsensors grafted onto Tiffany's skull. So long as she paid close attention, no one could hide their feelings from her. Not that Miko tried.

"Not too late to change your mind," Miko reminded her.

Tiffany shook her head. It was way too late. By now the *Nightingale* was boosting outsystem, accelerating toward light speed. *Nightingale* might at best make one last round trip, but heaven knows what she would return to. Belt City was in bad shape already.

Miko did not see it that way. Bad as Belt City was, Floreal figured to be worse. The whole B system had long been written off. Always the lesser half of the double system, 3645B had fewer people and slimmer prospects. 3645A might actually emerge from the coming catastrophe in fair shape. Belt City would be a memory, but there were schemes to recolonize the emerging G-type system, even using some of the same people. No one had any such plans for 3645B. It would be pulled into the white giant's incandescent zone, never to escape. Whatever circled that tiny red sun would be burned clean, torn apart, or vaporized. Maybe all three. Tiffany was dragging Miko into the eye of the storm.

"What's in Floreal anyway?" Miko genuinely wanted to know.

Tiffany shrugged. "That's what I am going to find out."

"Hell of a time to get curious."

"I have reasons. Why did you agree to take me?" Tiffany felt oddly protective toward the smaller woman, not wanting to see her hurt more. Miko could still back out, letting Tiffany pilot the ship.

Miko shrugged. "It's not like I'm going anywhere."

"You might have angled for the ticket out." Faith's claim to *Archangel*

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sounded dubious, even by Belt City standards. And Miko was the one getting Tiffany where she had to go.

Miko gave her head a swift shake that said drop the subject. Interfacing with the ship's computer, she set up a course for Floreal. "You are an odd one."

"Me?" If anything, Tiffany considered herself way too simple. Her mission left no room for complications.

"You act more concerned with me than with your own survival. You are not a holo anymore, remember?"

"But I am a volunteer."

"Just what confuses me." Miko punched the go code. They were off. Tiffany relaxed into the tedium of space travel. Dullest form of transportation this side of a submarine—with no feeling of movement, and only microscopic changes in scenery. Belt City shrank behind them. The B system got bigger ahead.

To pass time, she reshaped her stateroom, dumping the jungle motif that meant nothing to her, turning her living quarters into a grass-floored chalet in the Aesir Alps. Green meadows sloped down on all sides, dotted with bear grass and columbines. The Quartz Peaks shone in the background. She did it from memory, since her home world, Aesir III, was not in the *Archangel*'s files. Few things felt more satisfying than having your surroundings fit you perfectly. In the end, she got the bluegrass to blend so neatly into the meadow she had to show it off, and went looking for Miko.

Miko's stateroom was a beach house on Kikku, Chi Draconis IV—so Tiffany traveled better than a thousand light years just by crossing the saloon. The beach house was floored with fresh green-smelling tatami. Miko was out in the 3V area, on a long curving beach, splashing in the surf beneath china-blue skies.

Tiffany called out. Miko had to be only a few paces off; virtual effects made it look like a hundred meters. Someone was with her, playing naked in the waves. Tiffany shaded her eyes to see. Bright as the light seemed, it had been toned down. Chi Draconis was an F7 sub-giant, and romping in the surf at noon would knock you dead. She could not make out the second woman's face, but her hair and figure were unmistakable. It was Faith.

Suddenly, Miko appeared naked in front of her, dripping salt water on the tatami. Telescoped distance took Tiffany by surprise. She turned away, saying, "Sorry, I didn't mean . . ."

"Don't be." Miko reached for a towel. "I've got no secrets." A mild reproof—*she* was not the one hiding things. A minute later, Miko sat beside her on the alpine meadow, still wrapped in her towel, hands clasped across her knees, smelling like the sea. "Utterly stupendous," she declared. "So this is your home world?"

Tiffany nodded. "From time to time, I miss her."

"What made you leave?"

"Wanderlust. My training's in offplanet diplomacy. Figured it had to take me somewhere."

"Diplomacy? You mean the Peace Corps?"

"Yep." No harm in admitting that.

"A diplomat. Does it mean you're wired for lie detection?"

"I'm reading you right now. Hope you don't mind." Tiffany could turn it off.

"Why should I?" Miko had nothing to hide. Nothing she said ever registered remotely like a lie. Tiffany liked that. "What's a diplomat doing headed

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for Floreal? Shouldn't you be teaching Jutes and Choctaws to love their neighbors?"

Tiffany deftly switched the subject. "I don't suppose you come from Kikku."

Miko shook her head. "Born in a habitat. Never been outsystem. Never breathed open air."

"Might happen," Tiffany told her.

Miko gave her a long look. "Not the way we're headed."

"There's time." Tiffany felt awkward talking about the future, especially since there might not be one. She switched subjects again. "Are you in love with her?" If so, it explained a lot.

Miko stared out at the shining peaks. "Who wouldn't be?"

Tiffany shook her head decisively. "Not my type." She admired Faith's determination, but not her methods.

"I suppose you'd prefer a man?" Miko said it casually, still studying the mountains.

"Depends on the man." Tiffany meant it.

Miko shrugged. "Never saw the need myself."

"Really?" Tiffany felt natural curiosity starting to get the better of her.

"Sure." Miko looked her over. "You're cute enough to get whatever you want from guys. Blonde hair, big caring eyes, that willing smile—bet they can't *wait* to get their pants down."

"Thanks. But I try to aim a bit higher in my social life."

"I'll bet." Miko stared off again. "Me, I'm a hopeless romantic. Never wanted to have some guy grunting on top of me, whenever he was in the mood. I always wanted it all. The soft caress and tender kiss. Warm embrace, giving and getting. Smooth curves sliding with each other, faster and harder when the time is right. Loving that lasts. And not just in bed."

Tiffany shook her head. "At the moment, I've given up anything that doesn't get me where I'm headed."

"What a strange, obstinate obsession." Miko turned to rest her head on her knees, studying Tiffany intently. "Why won't you tell me what you're looking for in Floreal?"

"I will if you come with me." Tiffany meant that too.

"I'll think about it," Miko promised. Sensors put her down as undecided. But naturally curious.

Truth was, Tiffany wanted someone to share her troubles with, and Miko would be just about perfect, sharp, resilient, and caring. It was the sexual edge that scared her. Too bad Miko was not a man, with maybe Anton's body. Or looking like that young Choctaw at the starport.

With nothing to do but enjoy yourself, billions of klicks went quickly. They drank rare wines from lacquer cups, and picnicked off antique porcelain from Old Earth. Internal fields supplied various different gravities—ship standard, Aesir III normal, Kikku standard, low-g recreational, or whatever you felt like putting up with that morning. *Archangel* worked hard to take the sting out of space travel.

Entering B system, they began burning fuel to reduce speed, matching velocities with Floreal, orbiting close to the tiny nameless red sun. Orion 3645B had always been a backwater. Now it was a nearly empty one. The only people left were those who could not get out, and the looters and wreckers preying on them.

At a hundred million klicks out, they picked up a bogie, a high boost starship dropping downsun, rapidly closing the range. Miko called it to Tiffany's

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attention. Tiffany stared at the stereo imaging. "Have you tried contacting them?"

"Sure. Got a bunch of bullshit back."

"What sort of bullshit?"

"They are rushing to render assistance. Claim they have space to take people outsystem, and want to know how many they have to accommodate. Just jerking us off. Trying to find out who is aboard."

The notion of some random starship roaming a doomed backwater, offering priceless berths outsystem, was an insulting absurdity. The Choctaws at the starport had been more honest. Name and registration were given as the *Hiryu,* out of Azha system, Eta Eridani, a K-type star in the Far Eridani, 135 light years from Old Earth—sufficiently distant that there was no chance of confirming the registration within anyone's conceivable lifetime. The ship's spokesperson was a concerned female face and torso, so bland that she had to be synthesized. It did not take lie detection to know the starship's crew was laughing up their sleeves. Tiffany guessed the *Hiryu* was dangling hope in front of her victim, just to see what had been caught. "Can we make Floreal before they match velocities?"

"Barely," Miko decided.

It was an odd sort of chase. Both ships were slowing down, *Archangel* to match orbits with Floreal, and the *Hiryu* to match with them. The starship was catching up because it could slow down faster. Though not much faster. A gravity drive starship's big advantage was the ability to accelerate continuously over interstellar distances. This deep in a gravity well they had to operate at normal speeds just to stay insystem.

"Bullshit them back," Tiffany decided. "Thank them. Tell them who's aboard—but don't mention me being Peace Corps. Agree to rendezvous at Floreal. Ask if they have room for the Picassos too." Miko grimaced.

"If you don't want to, let me do it," Tiffany offered. "I'm the diplomat. It's not well known, but Floreal has a docking port. If we stall them off, we might be able to slip in before they know what's happening."

"No. I'll do it." Miko meant to be the pilot, for as long as it lasted.

They arrived ahead of the starship, which was in no particular hurry to run them down. Floreal was an old, old style habitat, a brown ashcan-shaped cylinder 80 klicks long and 20 klicks in diameter, rolling between the tiny ill-fated red sun and the fiery backdrop of the Orion Nebula. No superstructure or solar panels showed on her pitted surface. Belt City's spoke and hoop construction looked incredibly modern by comparison.

"Where is this docking port?" Miko sounded skeptical. Incommunicado for ages, Floreal had long been left to her fate.

"It should be at the upsun end of the cylinder. A chance search in electronic archives on Vanir came up with the entry codes, along with the original specs for Floreal."

"What were they doing there?"

"They were downloaded from files aboard the outward-bound survey ship *Sacajawea* when it called at Vanir II."

"Why would a survey ship have obscure data on an already settled system?"

"Good question. We signaled an immediate query to the *Sacajawea,* but she is currently on assignment deep in the Orion Spur of the Cygnus Carina Arm. Should take about forty centuries to get an answer."

No one had that sort of time. Miko maneuvered to put them into position to

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beam a tight coded signal at the docking port. Tiffany took over the computer and started signaling.

No response.

She ran through variations on the signal, emergency alternatives, then close random combinations and fanciful permutations, assuming Floreal's programming had deteriorated over time. She might as well have been beaming to a rock.

Tiffany was still bombarding the port lock with entry codes when she felt Miko's hand on her shoulder. "They've matched velocities. And are going to dock."

After coming trillions of klicks, through hazards aplenty, Tiffany had come up short, right at the brink of where she needed to be. And she had dragged Miko down with her. She shot her an anguished look, softly saying, "I'm sorry." Miko gave an I-was-dead-anyway shrug, paining her even more. Tiffany did not like being the last bit of bad luck Miko had to swallow.

Grapples hit the hull. *Hiryu* had seized hold of *Archangel.* There was nothing to do but see what came through the air lock. Tiffany got up, occupying herself by changing into a loose black silk *gi.* Stylish, comfortable, yet fit for close combat. Way more fit than she felt. She had nothing vaguely like a weapon. Her silly little stinger was the property of some young Choctaw.

Tiffany heard the click of adhesive boots on the hull. The lock cycled. Her breathing stopped, as if some huge weight suddenly pressed on her diaphragm. This was it.

What came through was worse than expected. She had hoped for something at least half human. Instead she got a beast in a vacuum suit and body armor. The v-suit was unsealed, with the helmet thrown back, letting her see a tawny chest, a brainy fur-covered head, and two long saber-shaped canines curving down from beneath cat's eyes. The most chilling bit of bio-engineering Tiffany had ever confronted. A SuperCat, *Homo smilodon,* bred centuries back from human and big-cat DNA, mainly as mercs and bodyguards, or for any task that needed inhuman ferocity and intimidation. Jutes and Choctaws were truant school kids compared to this lab-bred killer.

A second SuperCat followed the first one in. They took up stations on either side of the lock, leveling 20mm machine-cannons. Tiffany's belly tightened. With effort, she made herself exhale. Black holes at the ends of the recoilless cannon barrels looked big enough to stick a fist into.

She wanted to tell them to point the muzzles somewhere else, but knew the SuperCats would not obey. They were meant to scare her, and succeeded admirably. There was no sign of the solicitous young woman who had signaled them. She had been a polite bit of digital fakery.

Next came a man, alert and good-humored, with black tousled hair and attentive eyes. His v-suit, open to the navel, revealed a tattooed chest. A dragon inked into his left breast stared back at Tiffany. Whistling happily, he surveyed the saloon, mixing frank curiosity with open admiration. Then he bowed slightly, presenting himself, "Commander Hesse of the *Hiryu* at your ladies' service. Pleased to render assistance."

Sensors said he was giving his real name and rank. Why not? But Tiffany detected a mental hesitation at *Hiryu,* as he searched for the name his ship went by. The rest was pure formality.

"We don't want assistance," Miko retorted. It did not take sensors to tell she was angry, and frightened. Tiffany felt for her. Miko had every reason to be terrified.

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Hesse smiled, "Don't you know this system is about to be ripped apart? Your ship has no hope of escaping on her own."

"We'll take our chances," Tiffany told him. Better a cosmic collision than the courtly Commander Hesse.

His attention wandered, admiring the pictures spaced around the saloon. "I have never seen a real Picasso before—only 3V. Amazing what the ancients could do with crude hand tools. All our technology cannot hope to match it." Hesse turned back to them with a grin. "Clearly the man knew women and bulls."

Neither woman responded. Miko was still furious. Tiffany felt sickened. She had important things to do, and would not let herself be played with. Hesse sighed. "Well, I suppose you see them every day. To business then. What are you doing in this forsaken system?"

Miko had no good answer for that. But Tiffany did. "I am doing what you should be doing."

Hesse raised an eyebrow. "Which is?"

"Helping people escape." At the moment she was doing no great job of it, but the thought counted. "You have a high boost vessel. You could be taking ship-loads of people to safety."

"Oh, but you're wrong," Hesse assured her. "We *are* taking people outsystem. Cooperate, and you can come with us."

The first part rang true. The rest was a lie. Hesse was giving no guarantees. The dragon tattoo marked him as an Eridani slaver. *Hiryu* meant "Flying Dragon" in a dead language; that and the Eta Eridani registry made an archaic pun. Hesse was scouring the B system for anything, or anyone, worth taking—knowing the coming catastrophe would cover any crime. And here he had a truly lucky find, a rich ship, stuffed with fine wines and works of art, crewed by two marketable women. Hesse was simply savoring his catch. Cooperate meant submit. Do what he wanted, when he wanted it, and they *might* be taken outsystem.

Hesse unhooked the larger of two pressure suits hanging in the lock, saying, "So, will you come with us?"

Tiffany shook her head. She had not come trillions of klicks to end up in the hold of an Eridani slaver. "Take the paintings. Take anything what you want. But leave us be."

"Why?" Hesse was genuinely puzzled.

"I am going to Floreal."

He laughed. "Floreal is not taking customers. It is us or nothing."

"In that case, nothing." Saying it made her gut go hollow.

Hesse cocked his head. "You are a odd one. And pretty to boot. But right now women are plentiful, and I am not in the mood to pamper. Will you go, or not?"

"I don't want to go." Tiffany found she had to force the words out, telling herself she had no real choice.

"Too bad. I *could* force you. But I won't." This had to be a boring business for a freebooter, like hunting house pets with a line-of-sight laser. He tossed the v-suit at her feet. "Suit up. It's cold outside."

Tiffany stared at the crumpled suit. She had always pictured being set adrift in a v-suit as a particularly terrible way to die. Hesse must have thought so too, hoping that that might make her see reason. In the old days, you died in hours from hypoxia. But modern recyclers meant that your oxygen lasted days, even weeks. Death came slowly as body heat and wastes overwhelmed the recycler. Like being buried alive in vacuum.

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"Put it on," he told her. "Or you have my word you will go out the lock without it."

Tiffany silently pulled on the suit. She would have had a better chance appealing to the SuperCats. Sealing the v-suit up to the neck, she looked over at Miko, forcing on a smile, trying to give Miko a free choice. "I am sorry I got you here. Do what you must. You have been nothing but good to me."

Miko nodded, standing alone in the middle of the saloon, arms folded inside her short cut kimono, looking scared, angry, and horribly sad. Mirrored bulkheads reflected her into steadily shrinking infinity.

Hesse made an "after you" bow, and Tiffany sat herself down in the open air lock. Hesse reached in and took Miko's v-suit, then closed the inner door. The lock started to cycle.

Tiffany sealed her suit, telling herself she had no true choice. At absolute best, she would end her days as a concubine to Hesse, or someone like him. Giving up whatever gave life meaning—her hopes, ambitions, and any trace of dignity. Life at the lowest possible level. Maybe. If she was lucky.

Slavers operated with huge bounties on their heads. Every civilized world strove to shut them down; less civilized ones killed them out of hand. So victims never went free to testify.

And bad as slavers were, their customers were worse. Way worse. The utter scum of creation. In an age of 3V thrills, no one risked life and liberty buying from slavers—unless their tastes went beyond virtual rape and torment. The life Hesse offered could be lived in some obscene collector's harem, or in a locked brothel with her speech and memory centers erased. Not tempting.

But the alternative was death in a truly horrible manner. And Tiffany desperately needed to live. Listening to the air hiss away made the knot in her gut tighter. Horror welled up. She had been so *close*. Now she would die for nothing. Unless . . .

The lock stopped cycling. Then reversed itself. Was Hesse going to give her one last chance? Tiffany steeled herself. Just say no.

The inner door opened. Miko came in wearing her vacuum suit, the helmet unsealed and tipped back. Without saying a word, she sat down opposite Tiffany. The lock closed behind her. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Tiffany unsealed her right glove and held out a bare hand. Miko unsealed her glove and took it. Her hand felt small and fine-boned, her skin cool and comforting. She squeezed. Tiffany squeezed back.

The lock started to cycle again. Tiffany sealed up her suit, saying, "Grab an EVA pack."

Miko looked at her like that was some last sick joke. But Tiffany picked out an EVA pack, along with the lock emergency kit. Miko grabbed a pack and sealed up.

The lock stopped cycling. The outer door sprang open. A residual puff of air propelled them out of the lock into the void beyond.

Heavenly Twins

"Don't panic, Panic," she told herself. A family slogan that she'd made into her emergency mantra. The cosmos spun about her. An alarming sensation. Fright battled with nausea. Trying to twist about and orient herself just made the stars spin faster.

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"Quit batting vacuum." Miko's voice came from somewhere behind her left ear. "Lie still, spread your arms and legs."

Tiffany obeyed, holding tight to the EVA pack and repair kit. It worked. Spreading out dissipated her angular momentum, like a skater coming out of a spin. The stars slowed.

Miko continued to talk her out of her tumbling. "Now tell your suit to counter the spin."

Again she obeyed. Mini-thrusters at the hips and shoulders dampened her head over heels roll. The cosmos steadied. But the tiny thrusters had brought her to rest facing away from Miko.

"Now have your suit turn you around."

She did it. Miko came slowly into sight, facing her but upside-down. That would have to do. Miko drifted toward her, reaching out, taking hold of Tiffany's knees. She worked her way down Tiffany's torso, until their helmets touched. "Hi, gorgeous."

"Hi yourself."

"Turn off your comlink," Miko told her.

Tiffany did it, so Hesse could not listen in. Conduction carried their words from one helmet to the other.

Miko laughed. "You hang here often?"

"Only when I have to." Tiffany felt her panic fading. It did seem absurd, standing head to head, feet resting on nothing. And she felt genuine hysterical relief at not having to stare down those 20mm muzzles. Bad as this was, Hesse and his merry mutants had had it in their power to make things worse. A whole lot worse. Which could still happen. Tiffany asked, "Can you see the ships?"

"Sure."

"Turn me toward them." She wanted to see if the slaver really meant to maroon them, or was still playing cat-and-mouse. Trying to soften them up with a scare. Miko turned her until she was looking straight at the ships. The starship had grappled onto *Archangel* nose to tail. They looked like unrelated insects—*Archangel* sleek and tapered, *Hiryu* big and bulbous—in the middle of some bizarre mating, backed by black starry void.

Hesse seemed good to his word. The ships did not hang around to see if she and Miko had second thoughts. They fell away at once, accelerating upsun at close to 1g. Falling together into infinite distance, they became a single point of light—no longer separable by the eye—losing themselves amid the sea of stars. Bon voyage.

Tiffany's heart sank as she watched them dwindle. Terrible as Hesse was, it was still a come-down to find that you were totally expendable. Set adrift like living garbage, without so much as a parting gloat. Hesse had never even asked their names. Miko had been right. Tiffany was used to getting more out of guys than that. That young Choctaw at the Belt City starport probably still hoped she would show up again. Fat chance.

"Now turn me toward Floreal."

Miko did it. The huge habitat hung just downsun from them, completely blocking out Orion 3645B, and half the nebula beyond. "How far away are we?"

"Forty klicks. We aren't going to get there with orientation thrusters. Not anytime soon."

Tiffany opened her EVA pack and got out the line gun. "I'm going to try and snag it."

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Miko laughed again. "Girl, you are obsessed. That gun has only got twenty kilometers of line."

"That's why I told you to grab a pack. There should be more line in the repair kit. If we splice it all together we've got more than enough."

"Might work," Miko admitted.

"You got something better in mind? *My* social calendar is godawful empty at the moment."

"I said it was worth a try."

They did the best job they could of splicing the lines together. "This will hold," Miko decided. "But the gun is never going to reel it back in."

"Won't have to." Tiffany had thought this through. She took aim and fired. Even at this range, the recoilless line gun was not going to miss a target twenty klicks tall and eighty klicks wide. The rocket propelled grapple took its time getting there, but at last the line went taut.

Holding tight to the gun, Tiffany let the habitat's slow rotation reel them in. By the time their adhesive boots made contact, the line was wound twice around Floreal.

Leaving them hanging head-down from the barren surface of a sealed habitat in a doomed system—better than being adrift, but not by a lot. The pitted surface rolled slowly from frying to freezing, with no sign of life aboard. Tiffany fought the awful vertigo that came from standing on the outside of a spin gravity habitat, where every direction was down. She felt that if she so much as took a step, she would fall into a void thousands of light-years deep.

Miko touched helmets. "Welcome to Floreal." She did not seem the least troubled by the starry chasm around them. "Now what?"

Tiffany gripped Miko's shoulders to steady herself, swallowing the gorge rising in her throat. "According to the original specs, there should be a manual entrance lock nearby. A whole line of them actually. Spaced at intervals around the surface."

"Where?"

"Anti-spinward. About half a klick. Can you guide me?"

"No sweat." Miko acted totally at ease, aboard ship, in a v-suit, or hanging from a habitat. No wonder Faith found her useful. She led Tiffany over the rotating surface to the lock. There was no need for complex electronic entry codes. Miko undogged the hatch, pulled it open, and they were in.

There was no air in the narrow lock, and barely room for both of them. No light either, so they had to turn on their suit lamps. But it felt fantastic to be inside something, standing upright, no longer hanging over the awful gulf between the stars. Spin gravity seemed about .5g. Miko climbed up to the inner door, then came back down to touch helmets. "No pressure on the far side."

Not a good sign. No air. No light. If the habitat was an empty hulk, Tiffany would have thrown away her life for not very much. She stifled that thought. "Let's get going. There has to be pressure up there somewhere."

They climbed up and undogged the inner door. Dark airless tunnel curved in two directions, leading along the circumference of the habitat. Tiffany touched helmets. "Let's try spinward."

They set out, passing through two more pointless pressure doors. Each time they carefully sealed the doors behind them, hoping the one ahead would be holding air. Then they came to a hatch in the tunnel roof. Tiffany hoisted Miko up to check it. In half a g, she felt amazingly light.

Miko dropped back down and touched helmets. "There's air up there."

Tiffany felt vindicated. "We've made it!"

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"Maybe. Possibly. The hatch opens upward." That meant tons of air pressure was holding it shut. They might as well try to lift a moon.

"Which is why I brought the repair kit." Tiffany was amazed at her own foresight. "We can punch a hole in the hatch and equalize pressure."

They first checked to see that the length of tunnel they were in was sealed at both ends, then they walked up the curved wall to huddle at the hatch, hanging by their boots. Miko took the anaerobic torch out of the repair kit and cut a crisp hole in the hatch. Air gushed through. When the pressure equalized, she flung open the hatch. They scrambled through, emerging in an even larger tunnel. Still dark, but filled with breathable air.

Triumph swept through Tiffany as she unsealed her suit and tipped back her helmet, taking deep gulping breaths. Miko did the same. Then she reached over, taking Tiffany's cheeks in the flat of her slim little hands. Holding Tiffany's head steady, she kissed her.

Miko let go. Tiffany stared at the smaller woman's smiling face. "What was that for?"

Dark eyes danced with delight. Black hair lay plastered with sweat to her white cheek. "For being a beautiful blonde genius."

Tiffany took it as a compliment. She had not been kissed on the lips in a long time—and hardly ever by a woman. She was shocked at how good it felt. Miko acted like it was all perfectly normal. "Let's look for a shaft leading up," Tiffany suggested.

"Sure." Miko hefted the cutting torch. "Whatever turns you on." They set off down the big curving tunnel.

Tiffany jacked up her sensors, half meaning to focus them on Miko—to find out exactly what her companion was thinking. But she never got the chance. All of a sudden her middle ear microamps were hearing footfalls, big ones. And not human.

She seized Miko's shoulder, hissing, "Douse your suit lamps. Something's coming." They crouched together in darkness, listening. Tiffany's augmented hearing had the advantage, she recognized the oncoming 1-4-5-8-2-3-6-7 eight-legged gait. Tightening her grip, she whispered, "Bugs."

"Shit! Are they friendlies?"

"Wanna wait and ask?"

They turned and ran through the dark. Miko's question was answered by the bark of assault rifles, and the sound of ricochets at their heels. Bugs could see in the dark, and there was no hope of outrunning them. Or reasoning with them.

Tiffany found the hatch they had come out of by dead reckoning. Throwing it open, she dropped through, dragging Miko with her. Then she slammed it and dogged it, shouting to Miko, "Weld this shut."

Miko went to work immediately, fusing the lock mechanism into a useless lump. That would hold them, though not for long.

Tiffany tugged on Miko. "Let's go!"

"Where to?" Miko whispered, thoroughly frightened. Tiffany's sensors could hear her pulse pounding in darkness.

"The nearest access port is to spinward." They sprinted off down the tunnel, suit lamps on low. Tiffany could hear hammering on the hatch. Then some enterprising Bug stuck a gun barrel through the hole they had made, firing blindly. A typical Bug solution.

Bugs—aka "Sculptorian Symbiots"—were semi-intelligent xenos who had spread through much of the nearer spiral arm using a unique from of hive re-

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production. Bug hives attached themselves to starfaring cultures (like humans) by producing an endless supply of bio-engineered servants, eager to perform any task, no matter how boring or dangerous, fighting battles and cleaning toxic dumps for bare upkeep. They were way cheaper than human labor, cheaper even than machines.

Normally, you had little to fear from them. A hive's natural hostility was toward other Bug hives—a paranoid survival mechanism that propelled the species outward. But humans sometimes set them up as guards. Watchdogs with heavy weapons. If you didn't know the proper signal or password, you had a far better chance trying to talk sense to a Doberman. Or a SuperCat.

A big blast behind her told Tiffany that the hatch had been blown. Reaching the nearest port lock, she skidded to a stop. "Seal up," she shouted. The Bugs would be on them in seconds.

They sat shaking in the darkness as the lock slowly cycled. When there was pressure inside, Tiffany flung the inner door open. She told Miko, "Get in there and cut the safeties."

Miko obeyed. Tiffany fumbled in darkness, using the repair kit and EVA pack to jam the inner door open. Miko signaled that the safeties had been cut.

Bugs poured down the tunnel, firing as they came. Tiffany dropped into the lock. As she did, a shell slammed into her, hitting her life-support pack, throwing her against the side of the lock. Instantly, her suit went dead, lamps, micro-thrusters, recycler, all out. Only her boots and comlink still worked.

Wedging herself into the narrow lock, she grabbed hold of Miko, yelling, "Hold on!" Then she told the lock to open.

Habitat pressure doors all opened into pressure, to keep them from being blown out in an emergency. But an outer lock door opened outward, so the lock could be purged under pressure. Safeties were supposed to keep it from opening if the inner door was not closed. But Miko had cut the safeties, and Tiffany had jammed the inner door open.

A hurricane of air swept through the lock, trying to tear them free and throw them out into the void. But Tiffany held tight, and Miko instinctively braced her boots against the lock sides, telling them to stick.

The rush subsided, leaving them in the absolute silence of vacuum. Tiffany's head rang, and she fought to breathe, but all she had left was the air in her dead suit, fast going stale. A hot, stuffy, terrible sensation, like being trapped in a plastic sack on a blistering hot day.

Dark stifling numbness closed in on her. She tried to tell Miko what was happening, but she had hardly enough breath left to talk. Her head swam. She felt herself being borne upward, then blacked out.

Tiffany never expected to wake up. But she did, brought back by a cool rush of air, and a voice behind her ear, telling her to, "Breathe, girl. Breathe!"

She breathed, though she could not tell where the air was coming from. Miko sat holding her and coaxing her. Head slowly clearing, she sat up. Only then did she realize that she was tethered to Miko by an air hose. Miko had run the auxiliary line from her suit into Tiffany's. They were both breathing the same air. Turned into a pair of Siamese twins.

Miko helped her to her feet. Dead Bugs filled the tunnel. Bugs were tough customers, doting on intense heat and pressure, hard to kill even with handcannons. But they were air-breathers, just like humans. Decompression did them in handily, spilling Bug guts out their gill slits. "We have to get going before more come," Miko reminded her.

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Right. Got to get going. That seemed to have become her only purpose in life. Soaked, stunned, dizzy, and sick, Tiffany felt like she had been flushed through a sanitary unit. She put an arm around Miko and they set off, still tethered to each other by the air hose.

Every so often, Miko would stoop to scavenge weapons from dead decompressed Bugs. Tucking an assault pistol into her suit belt, she added extra ammo, then slung a bandolier of grenades over her shoulder. Finally, she selected a big recoilless cannon to lean on. Shaken and gasping, Tiffany did well just to keep walking. Besides, she was a diplomat, not allowed to touch lethal weapons.

Once they were back under pressure, she directed Miko to a hatch leading up, one too small for Bugs to use. No longer tethered, they hoisted themselves up into a sloping tunnel. Greenish gold light filtered down from above.

They set out warily up the tunnel, suits unsealed, helmets thrown back. Miko lugged her plundered arsenal. Tiffany carried the kit and packs. The tunnel widened. Cool damp earth replaced fused rock. Huge roots ran underfoot and overhead, threatening to trip and clip them. Sunlight filtered through a big raw earth hole ahead. Beyond the hole, Tiffany saw colossal green plants, and bright white sky.

Floreal

At the top of the tunnel, Tiffany stood and stared at the world within. Stalks of elephant grass towered over her head. Stems of huge flowering plants rose even higher, filling the sky with broad leaves and brilliant blossoms. Day moths the size of condors flitted through white light filtering down from above. Somewhere up there, behind a hologram sky, a fusion tube supplied light and heat to the habitat. Bird calls echoed through the greenery.

Stripping off her battered and useless v-suit, she took deep breaths of flower-scented air. Her fashionable black silk *gi* was a filthy mess, plastered with sweat. But the changes of clothes she had brought with her were now the property of polite smirking Commander Hesse. Spaced by slavers, hunted by Bugs, hit by a cannon shell, then nearly suffocated, she dearly needed a bath, a nap, and a new outfit. And maybe a meal to go with it.

The first thing she did was to duck discreetly behind a big leaf—the most misnamed part of a v-suit being the "relief tube." Water was all around her. Shadowy air felt hot and humid. Dew dripped down from giant leaves into big clear ponds on the garden floor.

Emerging from behind the leaf, Tiffany sat down on a patch of moss amid scattered EVA packs and spare ammo boxes. She stared longingly at the pools. Was it safe to relax? Miko laughed at her indecision. Setting down her gun collection, Miko stripped off her v-suit and cut-down kimono. Selecting a wide pool shaded by a colossal dripping leaf, she placed her machine pistol within easy reach, then slid eagerly into the water.

Tiffany envied Miko's ease with her body, never shy or embarrassed. Nothing to hide. Diplomatic training made Tiffany too worried about appearances, about the image she presented. Half the time she still felt like a holo. She watched Miko roll lazily onto her back, calling out happily, "Come on in, blondie. Water's wonderful."

Her sweat-soaked *gi* felt heavy and confining, while Miko's free and easy nudity cast a compelling spell. Smooth curving limbs, small cupped breasts,

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swelling hips, and the dark cleft between her buttocks, all looked clean and graceful buoyed by the clear water. Tiffany always secretly enjoyed women's bodies, telling herself she was responding not to sex, but to aesthetics.

Standing up, she untied her *gi,* discarding the jacket, then kicking off the pants. Tiffany could no longer count the times in the last few hours when she had thought herself dead. But here she was alive and whole—and they had made it to Floreal. The odds against that had been merely astronomical. She had every right to live a bit.

The pool's cool caress felt wonderful. Water slid over every centimeter of her skin washing away sweat and worry. Miko paddled over to be beside her. Tiffany reached out and took her hand, saying solemnly, "You saved my life."

Miko looked surprised. "When?"

"When I was suffocating in that suit. It was ghastly. I was sure I was dead, but I woke up tethered to you."

She laughed. "Girl, that was nothing. Standard survival procedure. You are the one who got us here."

Tiffany shook her head. "I'm going to make it up to you," she promised.

"Really?" Miko raised an eyebrow. Reaching out, she took Tiffany's other hand. Their fingers interlaced. They half-floated, half-sat, hands locked. Tiffany no longer needed her sensors to feel the pulse pounding in Miko's palms. "I have a secret to tell. Something I could not say until now."

Miko's dark eyes danced. "I've a secret to tell too."

"What's that?" She meant for Miko to have the first say.

"This is how you can make it up to me." Miko leaned forward and kissed her. Not a polite peck on the lips, but a long hungry kiss. Some secret. Having guessed what was coming, Tiffany opened her mouth to take it. The kiss felt fresh and exciting. All the tension of the trip flowed out of her. She had earned the right to get whatever she wanted out of her new life. Even if what she wanted was Miko.

Their lips parted. Tiffany told her, "Time for my secret. Floreal is a ship. A starship."

Miko's eyes widened. She looked about her, at the pool, the patches of elephant grass, the great green stalks soaring upward, supporting jewel-like flowers. "Oh, no. That's impossible!"

"It's in the specs off the *Sacajawea.* Floreal was a colony ship, the *Arcadia,* sent to settle the Orion Cluster ages ago."

"Can it take us outsystem?"

"I sure hope so." Otherwise this whole trip would be a colossal waste.

"You're amazing." Miko kissed her again, even harder. When their tongues untwisted, she demanded, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm sorry." Tiffany felt terrible about that. "But I had to see what sort of shape this place was in. And I could not risk the secret getting out. Imagine what would happen if the Jutes and Choctaws found out. Or Hesse and his happy slavers."

Miko stared at her, eyes aglow. "You are amazing. You risked your life coming here. And now you've saved *me,* and maybe half the system as well!"

"Not yet," Tiffany reminded her. "We can't be sure."

"I'm sure." Miko slid closer, kissing her even more fiercely. "Look what you've done already—unbelievable!" Tiffany had thought that by holding Miko's hands she might keep things under control. But Miko proved to be more adept than she imagined. Clamping her legs around Tiffany's thigh, she drew their bodies together. "Aesthetics" was getting out of hand.

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Tiffany looked at her sternly. "I hope you are not falling in love again." Sensors told her it was already too late.

Miko laughed. "Try and stop me." Her knee slid expertly between Tiffany's legs, and a calf curled around to rub her buttock underwater. Tiffany relaxed, letting Miko slide in closer, clamping her between calf and thigh. Miko started to rock. Which Tiffany found pretty exciting. Thrilling actually.

The thrill did not last. Tilting back, Tiffany froze.

"What's the matter?" Miko whispered. "Am I going too fast?"

"That's for sure," Tiffany whispered. "And there is a man watching."

Miko stopped rocking. Pulse racing, she let go of Tiffany's left hand, reaching up onto the bank. Her fingers closing around the butt of the recoilless pistol.

Tiffany kept her gaze fixed on the man. He was a dozen meters above the pool, in the crotch of a flowering tree, sitting on the back of a big feathered creature. Either a roc or hippogriff. It was hard to tell through the leaves and blossoms. The man himself was tan and handsome, with blond hair and broad shoulders. Seemingly nude, he had one of those firm, anatomically correct bodies that let you count every rippling muscle. He gripped a light slender lance, and a hand-forged long sword hung at his hip.

Miko rolled slowly off of Tiffany, turning the pistol toward him.

Smiling, he gave a jaunty wave. Seeming not to know or care what a pistol was, he called down in passable Universal, "Please, my ladies, don't mind me. I can wait until you are done."

"That's all right," Tiffany called back. Sitting up, she reached over to make sure Miko did not shoot. "We were just finishing here."

"Good. I would hate to disturb something so important." Voice modulation told Tiffany that he would have been perfectly happy to wait and watch. Lifting a leg, he swung easily off his half-hidden mount, then slid down the tree, landing on his feet. Through the leaves, he had looked like he had nothing on but the baldric supporting his sword. Closer up, Tiffany could see he wore tooled leather boots, a bright woven belt, and a magnificently stuffed codpiece.

Setting down his lance, he bowed, right hand obediently tugging his forelock. "Ja-lan of Apex, at your ladyship's service." Sensors said that was true.

Miko hissed in sotto voice, "Tell Sir Jolly of Pecs we do not need to be serviced."

Tiffany shushed her, diplomatic training taking over. "We could use help in finding our way. And some food as well." Their v-suits only held emergency rations, vitamin-glucose pills, and full meal tabs.

He straightened up. "But of course." Producing a bone whistle from his belt, he blew two sharp notes. Leaves rustled and a hulking troop of Super-Chimps stepped into the clearing around the pond. Silently they began picking up EVA packs, grenades, clothes, discarded v-suits and ammo boxes.

"That's our stuff," Miko protested. "Cut it out."

Tiffany shushed her again, seeing no percentage in putting up a fight. None of the chimps were armed, but there were at least a dozen of them, all big males, massing 200 kilos apiece. *Pan troglodytes supreme* was a chimp-human cross, bioengineered back in the early post-atomic. Grunts and pant hoots did not make them stupid. Their DNA differed from her's by a trifling 2 percent, and they could be dangerous when needed.

Besides, who knew what else hid in the greenery. A minute ago, Tiffany thought she and Miko had utter privacy. Now it turned out they had per-

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formed for an all-male audience. A chimp handed Ja-lan the big recoilless cannon, which he slung easily over his shoulder, giving the chimp his lance to carry. Perhaps he was not as innocent about guns as he pretended. No one made a move to take away Miko's pistol.

Miko insisted on having their clothes back, and they dressed with as much grace as they could muster. Ja-lan asked their names, smiling in appreciation when he heard Tiffany's. She liked that. Tiffany felt totally comfortable being called Panic—proud even. Never quite trusting guys who pretended her name was nothing special.

"Come, your ladyships." Ja-lan of Apex made a polite "after you" bow. "You will want to see the Flower Princess."

Sensors said he really believed that. What Tiffany wanted to see was the habitat's command deck—but she had to be careful not to make demands that might tip her hand, especially with no certainty of being fulfilled. Instead, Tiffany asked, "Who is the Flower Princess? And why would we want to see her?"

Ja-lan replied with a puzzled look. "You are indeed from far away. The Flower Princess is the Sacred Queen's daughter. She can best help you. I am, after all, merely a man."

Merely a man. How completely helpless. This came from two meters of tanned savage, with a long sword at his hip, and a recoilless cannon slung over his shoulder! Yet sensors said he meant it. Tiffany felt like she was getting a lesson in polite open diplomacy.

They set out into the tall green tangle with Ja-lan leading. Vines snaked overhead, palm fronds brushed Tiffany's hips and shoulders, roots tripped at her feet. Huge swift insects hummed and darted about, barely visible through the canopy. Twice they had to stop for giant centipede-like creatures, multi-legged horrors the size of a house who were placidly eating their way through the landscape. Finally, they came to a clearing choked with elephant grass. Beyond the grasstops, Tiffany could see the green sides of the habitat curving up into cloudy hologram sky. They seemed to be at the bottom of a jungle valley, surrounded by misty heights—standard for a hollow spin-habitat where every direction was up.

Ja-lan's feathered mount flew down to join them. He was a hippogriff—half bird, half mammal—a semi-intelligent, bioengineered beaked quadruped, designed to be a flying mount and pack animal for low-g worlds and habitats. SuperChimps set down their burdens and melted into the tall grass, returning with fruit; pears, mangos, and mutant papayas.

As they sat eating, Tiffany's microamps picked up the whap-whap-whap of jet-powered rotors. A sleek tilt-rotored twin-tailed VTOL came in low over the canopy, hovered for a second like a silver insect, then descended into the clearing, flattening the tall grass with its propwash. Between its stubby wings sat an open cabin with a curved windscreen. Chimps piled the packs and ammo aboard, and Ja-lan walked his hippogriff into the enclosed cargo hold beneath the cabin, then turned to them. "Come, please. The Flower Princess will be delighted."

Miko looked at her, as if to say, "Now what?"

Tiffany shrugged—"We go." The last man among mutants who had offered her a ride had ended up stuffing her out an airlock into orbit. But Ja-lan of Apex had Commander Hesse beat by a parsec. Instead of smirking and threatening, he got her and Miko to do whatever he wanted just by being winsome yet manly. Had Ja-lan been in command of the slavers, she and

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Miko would be in the bowels of the *Hiryu,* whisked politely off to who-knows-where.

Miko shook her head. "Okay, boss lady. But if things turn out badly, remember my impulse was to plug him."

"I'll keep it in mind."

They trooped aboard, leaving the Chimps in the clearing, and the silver VTOL lifted off. There was no crew, and the flight must have been preprogrammed. Ja-lan spent the whole trip pointing out sights and peeling their mangoes.

Halfway up the cloud-wracked valley a gleaming aerostat hove into sight, a floating gold pyramid of ultralight construction, topped by the slender towers of a temple-palace. Ja-lan grinned proudly. "Welcome to Apex."

The VTOL set herself down on a hanger pad at the edge of the floating city. From there, moving stairs took them past narrow walk-streets and hanging gardens. People packed the rooftops and terraced patios—naked children sat atop garden walls—all watching in awed silence, even the kids. "We don't have visitors very often," Ja-lan explained.

Tiffany could believe it, considering what she had come through to get there. "When did you last see someone from outside?"

"None of us can remember," Ja-lan admitted. "Perhaps the Flower Princess knows."

Flowers climbed the walls and towers of the temple-palace. The princess herself waited for them at the top of the moving stairs, wearing a bell-shaped skirt, embroidered jacket, and a blood-ruby necklace, her black serpent tresses held in place by a diamond comb. Beside her stood a nude serving girl with flowers in her hair, gravely holding a gold cup of welcome.

Ja-lan stopped at the head of the stairs, saying men could come no farther. "But my good wishes go with you."

Tiffany took the cup to her lips. The wine was fresh and fruity. Sensor readings showed the Flower Princess was as serene as she seemed—totally at ease on her palace porch. In the midst of her floating city. Surrounded by a sealed habitat guarded by maniacal gun-toting Bugs, orbiting in an abandoned system.

All Tiffany got was that greeting cup. There was no question of hearing their business until they had been groomed, fed, and rested. Women and girls took them to a tiled pool, for their second dip of the day, toweling them dry afterward. Long flowing skirts and bright embroidered blouses waited for them on the tiles. Their own clothes were whisked away, along with Miko's recoilless pistol.

Having been washed, dressed, and disarmed, they were lodged in an airy tower room, trimmed with polished aromatic wood and decorated by rows of tiles glazed in astonishing hues. There they were fed figs, flatbread, humus, honey cakes, and black olives off crystal platters. Seeing there was no rushing these people, Tiffany ate and slept.

She was awakened by an eager brown-skinned serving girl called Dee-vi, who climbed up to sit cross-legged on the bed, saying, "The Flower Princess will see you now."

Her highness turned out to be a hard sell. Tiffany's sensors showed the Flower Princess was concerned but unconvinced. "We must protect ourselves," she explained. "The outside is a dangerous place."

Tiffany agreed, but pointed out that the outside universe would soon come crashing into Floreal.

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"So you say. We know more about the outside than you might imagine. For instance we know that a dozen hours ago a slaver ship rendezvoused with another vessel, then dropped off two passengers. Shortly afterward, you appeared."

Tiffany admitted that they were those two. Her ensuing story about being summarily tossed out the airlock by Commander Hesse sounded fairly hollow, even to her.

"What if I told you that slaver ship has returned, matching orbits with us?"

Tiffany believed it. Hesse must have come back to see if a dozen hours in a v-suit had made her and Miko more manageable.

"Luckily, it is not up to me to decide," the Flower Princess declared. "The Sacred Queen will want to interview you, and make her own decision."

"When will that be?" Tiffany had much to do, and not much time to do it in.

"When she wills it."

The audience was at an end. Dee-vi, their grinning serving girl, waited at the door of the chamber, anxious to see to their needs. Wanting to get her bearings, Tiffany asked for a tour of the aerostat. Dee-vi happily obliged, taking them from the highest tower to the city edge, where winged young people sat perched on railings like gargoyles, gossiping and flirting, then soaring out over the misty green riot below.

Unlike the Flower Princess, Dee-vi had an insatiable interest in anything they had to say, asking wide-eyed questions about the world outside. Accepting whatever answers she got as gospel, Dee-vi was ecstatic to discover that Floreal was a starship. She could see the universe without leaving home—a child's dream come true. But Tiffany discovered that even a sanitized version of their trip showed how unreal the outside sounded—ships crisscrossing vast empty voids inhabited by Jutes, Choctaws, and giant white stars run amok. Dee-vi had trouble comprehending what it was that slavers did.

"It's not as bad as Tiffany makes it out," Miko told her.

"There are lots of peaceful, pleasant parts to the universe. They are just impossibly far away. So far off, I've certainly never seen them. Which is why this habitat needs to be headed outsystem. And soon." Especially since this chaotic little corner of the cosmos was doomed.

"That is up to the Sacred Queen," Dee-vi gravely informed them. The child had complete faith in the Queen's decisions.

"So we need to put our case to her," Tiffany explained. The sooner the better.

"You will," Dee-vi assured her. "She plans for everything."

"Can't we just go see her?" By now Tiffany knew they had no virtual conferencing. Not even a voice comlink. Talking to Dee-vi had given her a better grip on how Floreal worked. What first seemed like a matriarchy was something more complex. Instead of outright female rule, Floreal had separate spheres. She and Miko were a women's problem, because they *were* women. If Commander Hesse had come knocking at the habitat door he would have gotten a different reception. Men would have dealt with him, as they saw fit. Women would have stayed out unless needed. Weird but workable. And not without its advantages.

"Of course you can see the Queen." Dee-vi told them. "Any woman can. She holds durbar in her High Court at the Cliffs of World's End. You can take your ship and go there."

Tiffany had to explain that all the wondrous ships she had ridden in were no longer available.

"Then you must find someone who has one."

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"The only person we know outside of the palace is a man named Ja-lan."

"Everyone knows Ja-lan." Dee-vi's eyes brightened. "Three times fencing champion. Tall, fearless, always friendly and happy to talk. He says 'Hi' when he sees me."

"Can you tell him we need a ship?"

"Gladly." Serving two mysterious outworlders was becoming more of a lark than she imagined. At dusk Dee-vi guided them back to the tower, then disappeared in search of Ja-lan. It seemed way too easy.

Their clothes were washed and folded, lying atop their other possessions. Only the weapons and ammo boxes were missing. No one had told them they could not have them, or tried to take them away. They were just gone. Miko mentioned the absence, and got the stock response—take it up with the Queen.

Apex had no sun, but nightfall was still a spectacle. Clouds shredded into sunset colors, making their enameled tower room glow like the interior of a Fabergé egg. The hologram sky purpled, darkening to match the eternal night outside, streaked by neon gas clouds and studded with stars. Tiffany knew that less than twenty klicks overhead hung the inner surface of the habitat, covered by dark flowering canopy. You could smell the jasmine and sweet honeysuckle. Yet the feeling of depth was uncanny. Swift moving moonlets sent drifting patches of light through the tower windows.

Romantic and then some. Relief, recent peril, and impending doom made the moment utterly special. Tiffany sat propped across from Miko in their high tower window, their legs and lower bodies braced together, holding each other in. Astonished by the beauty of the place, they laughed and joked, basking in their survival. Talking about the absolute need to save this world. And themselves with it.

Maintaining the right attitude took effort. Tiffany had come a long way, and still she was not there. As friendly as Apex seemed to be, these people were strangers. Somehow she had to make them see the danger they faced. But now she had someone to share her feelings with, someone she could trust with the truth. She felt a flood of affection for Miko. It was very much the two of them, against all odds. She studied her newfound friend. Long black hair hung down over small pale shoulders. Slim limbs bent just so helped hold Tiffany in the window. Her laugh was bold and happy.

Then it was time for bed. Tiffany sat watching Miko strip in a pool of moonlight. A whole new world, and now this. Very much a night to remember. Standing up, she let her skirt drop, then slipped between the satin sheet and silk coverlet without taking off her blouse. Miko was a warm presence, weighing down her side of the bed.

"Worried?" Miko asked.

"No." She shook her head. "Just shy."

"You don't have to be." Miko laughed. "It's only me."

Right. Tiffany reached out and stroked Miko's delicate shoulder, marveling at how it felt both smooth and solid at the same time. Miko lay on her side, smiling, one hand resting between them, the other at her side. She shifted slightly, and her in-between hand touched Tiffany's breast, feeling her nipple through the fabric. Her fingers were slim, their tips tiny, but Tiffany could not believe how good it felt. Her worries dissolved. She let her own fingers follow Miko's arm down to where her hand rested on her hip.

As much as this might feel right—as sure as Tiffany was of what she would find—she still had that first-time sense of awe and anticipation. The feeling

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that tonight was indeed special. Maybe Miko was what she had always been looking for.

A shadow appeared, silhouetted in the window. Tiffany saw a long shining line of steel. Someone hissed, "Your ladyships, I am here."

"What?" Miko rolled swiftly over.

"Dee-vi said you wanted me," the shadow explained.

Tiffany saw Ja-lan crouching in the window they had vacated. He must have climbed the vines twining around the tower. Without much trouble apparently; he was not even breathing hard.

Miko groaned aloud.

"Please, we must be quiet," Ja-lan begged. "I am not supposed to be here."

"That's for sure," Miko snorted, refusing to be silenced.

"Dee-vi said you needed a ship. To see the Sacred Queen."

"Can't it wait?" Tiffany suggested. "In the morning maybe."

Ja-lan shook his head. "It must be now, otherwise I would never have risked the climb. This is a woman's tower." Was a woman's tower. "If I could have waited, I would have. It is a banishing offense just to be here."

Tiffany sat up, putting her hand on Miko's shoulder. "We really need a ship."

Miko groaned again, lying back, hands over her eyes. "Just promise me he is not going to make a career of this."

"Of course not." Tiffany leaned over and kissed her. "I promise, once we get this done we'll find a place to be alone."

"With a lock on the door?"

Tiffany promised, then kissed her again. "Let's get going before someone sounds the alarm." She got into her *gi,* not wanting to go climbing about in a long skirt.

Miko pulled on her short kimono. "Can't we use the lift?"

Ja-lan shook his head. "Someone might see. And we need to cross the roof below to get into the hanger."

Low-g and moonlight made the climb down a breeze. Tiffany dropped the last ten meters to the rooftop. Light and voices filtered up from below. Ja-lan led them on a zig-zagging course across flat roofs, up and down narrow stairs, and through a garden court inhabited by a flock of peacocks. Suddenly, he stopped, holding out his hand.

Tiffany peered down. A silver shape protruded out onto a dark landing pad. She realized she was seeing a small semi-rigid airship from above. Crouched beside her, Ja-lan whispered, "This is our ship. Lower yourselves lightly onto the upper deck. Side ladders lead into the cabin below. But be as quiet as you can."

"Why so much secrecy?" she whispered back.

"Because we are borrowing her."

"Without permission?" Miko suggested.

"Exactly." Ja-lan grinned. He was obviously having a time of it, breaking into a women's tower, stealing an airship, making off with female outworlders. Tiffany guessed that Floreal did not offer a champion swordsman many chances for high adventure.

She did as he said, lowering herself to the silver back of the ship, then climbing down a curved ladder to the cabin below. Where Dee-vi waited. Their serving girl helped her and Miko through the cabin window. Ja-lan swung in behind them, going straight to the cabin controls. He started up the engine, then released the landing grapples. They were off.

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The airship sailed swiftly through the perfumed night beneath artificial stars. Tiffany spotted another aerostat to starboard, a soft pyramid of gleaming rooftops and lamp-lit windows. Dee-vi told her, "That is Eyrie, where my mother's cousins live."

Pursuit soon caught up with them. Just as they reached topless moonlit cliffs, Tiffany's audio sensors picked up the whap-whap of rotors. She spotted a flier's running lights, coming up fast. Ten times as swift as the airship, the VTOL swooped down to grapple them from above, like a white spider falling on its prey.

The two ships hung there, beside dark towering cliffs that were really one end of the habitat. The High Court's landing stage lay less than a kilometer away, but the VTOL's jet rotors kept them from moving so much as a micron.

Tiffany heard footsteps on the upper deck, then on the ladders leading down to the cabin. Moments later, swordsmen came swinging in the cabin windows, blades drawn. Ja-lan leaped to meet them in the middle of the cabin, keeping the women at his back. His blade flashed in the cabin light, disarming one intruder, then pinking another in the shoulder, drawing first blood.

Ja-lan was in his element, eager to show off his swordsmanship. His opponents were not so pleased. Tiffany's sensors showed they were hesitant. Not happy to be dragged out of their beds in the middle of the night, then forced to face the local fencing champion in a narrow cabin, where only two of them could come at him at once.

She yelled, "Stop at once, by order of the Queen."

Slowly the men lowered their swords. Accustomed since birth to taking commands from women, they looked warily at Tiffany. Stepping past Ja-lan, she put herself between him and the boarding party. "We are here to see the Sacred Queen. And travel under her protection." That last part was diplomatic license, but who could contradict her?

"We are here to get this ship back." The man who spoke was the one holding his shoulder. Blood oozed between his fingers, giving him the most right to complain.

"You shall have it," Tiffany told them. "But we all want to be let off at the High Court landing stage. You have no right to keep us from seeing the Queen."

Apex's loose personalized relations played to her advantage. The boarding party had to decide among themselves what to do, there being no way to send back for orders. They could return in triumph with the ship they were sent to get. Or they could get cut to ribbons by a master swordsman, attempting to forcibly prevent three women from seeing the Queen. None of them wanted to risk his skin getting drawn into something that would ultimately be decided by females. Better to bring the ship back empty than to return with disgruntled women aboard. Who knew what story they would tell the Flower Princess?

So they were set down on the moonlit landing stage. Topless cliffs towered out of sight above them. Kilometers above, at the zero-g level of the habitat, up and down reversed themselves, and the cliffs extended on to meet the jungle floor again. No wonder they called it World's End.

Tall Bug warriors stood on the steps leading up to the High Court, looking like giant Hindu war gods, each clutching four huge shining scimitars in its four upper limbs. Ja-lan bowed to Tiffany, saying, "I can come no farther."

"You have done more than enough," she assured him.

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"Way more," Miko added.

The smiling swordsman straightened up, saluting them with a sweep of his blade. "Happy to be of service."

They left him on the landing stage at the base of the steps. What went on inside was women's business. Some laws and decisions applied to everyone, like the silent ban on firearms. But enforcement was by gender. Women had to pass on her and Miko, before their case went to the men. Ja-lan was jumping the gun a bit, but only at Dee-vi's request.

Their serving-girl-cum-guide bounded up the stairs, ignoring the towering Bug warriors, anxious to show them the High Court. Nothing so far prepared Tiffany for what she saw inside. The Queen's court had a giant-sized audience chamber, partly to accommodate the Bugs. A Hive Queen half-filled the chamber, something few humans saw in the flesh. A titanic thirty-two-legged monster, she lifted her forward segments in the air, looking them over as they entered. Eight-legged workers scurried about regurgitating food and water for her, and carrying off egg cysts.

Between them and the Bugs stood a crowd of women, mostly older women in great belled dresses, with a few younger ones sprinkled among them. But none of them were real. Tiffany's sensors told her these were all holos, giving off no brain waves or skin response. Dee-vi had told her the memories and personalities of dying queens were downloaded to advise the living one—appearing as holos when needed.

This ghostly court flanked a raised dais supporting an empty throne. A cushioned stool actually, low and backless, Roman-style with carved ivory legs, and the same ancient simplicity as the *Archangel*'s Picassos. But empty nonetheless. Tiffany surveyed the hall, looking for someone to sit in it. All she saw were holos and xenos. Aside from her and Miko there was only one flesh-and-blood female in the room. . . .

Dee-vi bounded gleefully up the dais steps, then turned toward them, seating herself triumphantly on the throne. She laughed at their surprise, like a mischievous kid sitting in her elder's seat. Only this was for real. The Flower Princess was the Sacred Queen's daughter only in a metaphorical sense.

"Do you have anything to add?" Dee-vi asked. "Any more proof to offer?" It was plain that their interview with the Sacred Queen had been going on throughout their stay at Apex.

Tiffany stood at the foot of the dais, digesting this diplomatic surprise, shocked at how easily she had been fooled. She had run her sensors over Dee-vi repeatedly; all she had seen was a happy headstrong kid, eager to learn and utterly open. She had never thought to ask Dee-vi if she were the Sacred Queen.

She shook her head. "Why did we have to go through the motions of stealing a ship?" That seemed an unneeded hazard.

"You said you were a diplomat. I wanted to *see*." Dee-vi said it the way a child would. She had been half testing Tiffany, and half just wanting to see for herself.

Tiffany surveyed the chamber, looking for anything that might bolster her case. Her gaze fixed on the Hive Queen, rearing over the humans and holos like some titanic centipede. "Ask the Bugs."

"Ask them what?" Now Dee-vi looked surprised.

"They can chart the course of that white giant I told you about, Orion 4673." Humans might turn inward, trying to seal themselves off from the cosmos—but not Bugs. Bugs were great celestial navigators. (But bad ship-

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builders.) In fact, it was probably the Bugs who kept the Flower Princess informed of the *Hiryu*'s movements.

"It will be done," Dee-vi nodded gravely. "But we have already seen enough to make our decision. What would you have us do?"

Tiffany felt triumphant, seeing success at last. "What we do depends on what you have got. Miko's the pilot. She needs to check out your drive. The specs also showed you having a hangar full of low-boost insystem ships. Is that true?"

Dee-vi nodded. "We have ships. In what condition I would not know, we never use them."

"Great. I would like to see them." Tiffany was already making plans that went beyond Floreal—thinking of that woebegone Choctaw girl in the Danse Macabre.

It was some time before she got to see the hangar—which did indeed have a row of insystem ships, sleek old-fashioned cargo lighters that looked good as new. By then Miko had passed on the habitat's gravity drive. Floreal could be moved. And not just Floreal. If these ships worked as well, they could take everyone left in the B system with them. But that meant opening up the habitat to strangers, which would require still more diplomacy.

Ja-lan had joined them—there being no women's mysteries on the hanger deck—happily looking over the line of ships. Tiffany could tell he liked the turn of events. Apex must have seemed pretty small to a man of his talents. Now Floreal herself was looking outward. Who knew what the future held?

Miko cautioned everyone not to get carried away. "We have to see if they will fly." She cycled the lock on the nearest lighter. It worked. Miko nodded to Tiffany. "Want to check it with me?"

Sure. Her future plans depended on these ships. They cycled through. As soon as they were alone, Miko pulled her face down and kissed her.

Surprised, Tiffany managed to respond, then asked, "What was that for?"

"For everything. For giving us all a chance." Miko leaned back against the bulkhead, her hand on the lock lever, keeping it from cycling. She nodded at the closed hatch. "You like him, don't you?"

"You mean Ja-lan? Sure." He was sharp, and sweet, and hung like a hippogriff. "What's not to like?"

Miko hooked her finger into the waist of Tiffany's *gi,* pulling her closer. "I mean, you really go for that 'Ah shucks, I'm just a guy' stuff?"

Tiffany looked puzzled. "Well, who wouldn't?"

Miko rolled her eyes.

Tiffany braced her arms against the bulkhead, framing the smaller woman's shoulders. "Look at me."

"Gladly." Miko smirked. They were only centimeters apart and in love. What else was there to see?

"I'm trying to save not just Floreal, but this whole forsaken system," Tiffany told her. "Maybe even the overflow from Belt City. Which means holding off looters and wreckers, while convincing these people to risk everything for the sake of others. In the meantime, I have been beset by Jutes, Choctaws, Eridani slavers, and Bugs gone berserk. And I am in the middle of a relationship with another woman—something I have never, *never* done before. So am I really going to start up with some guy, just because he happens to be sweet, brave, and available? Who do you think I am? Superwoman?"

"Sometimes." Miko rose on her toes and kissed her again. O

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

PORTS OF CALL

by Jack Vance
Tor, $24.95(hc)

The arrival of a new Jack Vance novel in the mail is invariably a signal for this reviewer to set aside all other reading and plunge into the sardonic prose and colorful settings of his favorite author. In *Ports of Call* Vance mines the rich vein of material that characterized his work of the fifties and sixties: space opera, rambling across a variety of idiosyncratic worlds peopled with characters whose moral orientation is ambiguous at best. Vance doesn't really give a damn how a star drive works, only what kind of place it gets his characters to—and what kind of trouble he can get them in once they arrive.

Vance begins with a callow young protagonist, Myron Tang, whose dream is to become a space traveler. After earning a largely impractical college degree in astronautics and related subjects, he becomes part of the household of his great-aunt, Dame Hester Lajoie, a rich and eccentric widow who has acquired a space yacht, the spoils of a lawsuit. After reading in a magazine that a reclusive doctor has set up a rejuvenation clinic on a distant planet, Dame Hester determines to travel there. Naturally, Myron finds a way to get himself appointed captain of the yacht.

His good luck does not last long. Dame Hester finds shipboard life monotonous, and insists on interrupting the journey to visit various worlds, which turn out to be not to her taste. But a stranded traveler from one of those planets is to her taste, and when (after she "hires" him as purser) Myron attempts to assert his authority as captain, he finds himself stranded in his own turn—on a dreary, rule-bound world, with just enough cash for a ticket home. By luck, he meets a crew of spacemen, who have an opening for a cargo handler (the previous occupant of the post having fallen afoul of local laws), and heads off into space once again.

This begins a picaresque adventure that has no clearly defined goal (although the notion of revenge on Dame Hester is never abandoned). Nor does the journey have any clear end. Instead, we have visits to a series of worlds, the "ports of call" referred to in the title, in which Myron and his shipmates encounter a variety of adventures. Wingo, the Chief Steward, is an artist by avocation—to be precise, a photographer who tries to capture the essence of the various cultures they visit in a series of candid "mood impressions." Schwatzendale, the Engineer, is a card shark and all-around gambler, who preys on anyone willing to wager a few sols with him. Captain Maloof, for his part, is a practical man behind whose competent exterior lingers an inner man with some romantic vision—never quite defined, and possibly unattainable.

Each world they visit presents a different set of challenges, but the common thread is easily defined: the utter depravity of the human race. One society has as its main export the skins of its neighbors—and the occasional careless tourist—carefully tanned and preserved. Captain Maloof has no scruples about carrying such cargo, which is turned into *objets d'art* for offworld connoisseurs; Myron, for his own part, becomes the

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object of attention of local hunters, who see in his blond hair the makings of a premium-quality pelt. On another world, they visit a bazaar, where the merchants' profit motive seems primarily focused on robbing the spacers. Danger is a constant, and life is cheap—the body count rises steadily, and there are no tears wasted on the dead. Nor do any of the characters show much compunction about the treatment of indigenous peoples—most of whom are portrayed as nothing better than cutthroats. Vance has never displayed a high level of faith in the benevolence of the human animal, but this book shows those putative human qualities at their nadir. The closest thing to a moral center here is the law of the jungle—"Eat or be eaten."

All this sounds like a recipe for a sordid, depressing tale with no clear resolution—except that Vance's sheer exuberance carries all before it. When a group of pilgrims traveling on the ship fall into a series of card games with Schwatzendale, Vance milks the encounters for all the comic mileage he can get out of every swindle and counter-swindle, as the pilgrims attempt to recoup their losses. When Moncrief, another con artist against whom Schwatzendale nurses a long-cherished grudge, makes his appearance, the reader's appetite for the competition has been whetted. (In the process, Vance invents a charming variant of the classic "shell game," along with a variety of ingenious schemes for beating the game—most of which are doomed to failure.) He also has a well-tuned sense of just how much detail to reveal—we get enough of the lingo of a game to grasp its spirit, but we are spared long description of the rules or actual play—a sure way to bore most readers.

Vance also takes the opportunity to tweak several inviting satiric targets: health faddists, penal reform, and religious hypocrites among them. The various con games and swindles that make up much of the plot make clear both the venality and gullibility of many of the cast. But nobody is entirely immune. On a trading visit to an experimental prison, Captain Maloof and his crew are much amused by the preposterous notions of giving the prisoners self-esteem, and are openly skeptical of the claim that post-hypnotic suggestions can help reform the felons. Very few readers will be surprised that the warden decides to give them a personal lesson on the effectiveness of hypnosis. . . .

As always, one of the prime attractions is Vance's ability to evoke a vivid sensual portrait of an alien world. Whether he is describing a landscape, a meal, the wares in a shop, or the entertainer in a bar, he can do as much in one paragraph as most writers can in several pages. The gusto in these descriptions has always been one of his hallmarks, and it shows no sign of failing. Likewise, his dialogue is utterly identifiable. The cast of characters ranges from impish young girls to cynical old con men, each voice more or less believable and different, and yet it would be hard to find an extended speech that doesn't reveal itself as Vance's work.

Another of the regular attractions of Vance's writing—at least to those who enjoy the sound of the language—is the wide range of his vocabulary. It is hard to think of another writer who would have one of his characters refer to himself and his comrades as "Picaroons," or who would describe stilt-walkers as performing "saltarellos." Nor is Vance's colorful language confined to the baroque end of the spectrum: when the pilgrims are griping about the delay in reaching their destination, one of their number describes them as "crouching" at their current location, and another characterizes them as "diddling and twiddling" away

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their time. There is a playful quality to many of his place names as well: "Impy's Landing" is the pilgrims' destination, and "Salon Sain" is the world of the health-conscious Dame Hester. And to pick just one of the many character names, Moncrief goes by the sobriquet of "Mouse-rider"—which refers to a former occupation that Vance, characteristically, never fully explains.

The most obvious flaw in this book is its failure to wrap things up convincingly. Endings have never been one of Vance's strengths; several of his most interesting books (*Emphyrio* comes to mind) have disappointing endings. There is a good deal of unfinished business here; in particular, we would like to see the rest of both Myron's and Captain Maloof's stories. One hopes that Vance has not simply lost interest in this set of characters, or run out of steam at the three-hundred-page mark (not an excessively long novel by today's standards). It would be a shame not to find out what happens when Myron catches up with his great-aunt Hester, and uncovers the truth behind the longevity clinic that has lured her into space—there ought to be enough satiric meat in that encounter, and in whatever ports of call wait along the route there, to make another volume every bit as wickedly entertaining as this one.

I'll be watching my mailbox.

VANCE SPACE: A ROUGH GUIDE TO THE PLANETS OF ALASTOR CLUSTER, THE GAEAN REACH, THE OIKUMEME, * OTHER EXOTIC SECTORS FROM THE SCIENCE FICTION OF JACK VANCE

by Michael Andre-Driussi
Sirius Fiction, $5.00 (chapbook)

Over the course of his long career, Vance's fictional universe has expanded every bit as relentlessly as the real one. While he has written the occasional series set all on the same world, it is more common for each new book to introduce one, or just as likely several, new worlds as settings for the action. In fact, place names are a key part of many Vance titles: *The Languages of Pao, Dudrane, Araminta Station, Big Planet.* As the subtitle indicates, this chapbook from Andre-Driussi presents itself as a "guidebook" to the various worlds of Vance's fiction, up through last year's *Night Lamp.* (Of course, *Ports of Call* makes it instantly out of date, but the author surely knew that would happen when he undertook such a guide.)

Each world is given a brief physical description: the names of its sun and satellites, its geography and such other physical characteristics as Vance has specified in the relevant story or novel(s). The societies and indigenous races are briefly described, along with the world's history, government and economics. A brief list of "useful terms"—consisting of those colorful invented words that Vance is so fond of—concludes each article. Most of the entries are about one page long, and even such a world as Tschai (from the four-volume "Planet of Adventure" series) gets only a page and a half. A "Tentative United Timeline" and a brief catalog of worlds by type of government conclude the book. Additionally, a couple of charts attempt to locate the various worlds in relation to the actual layout of our galaxy. The total length, by the author's own estimate, is roughly ten thousand words—novelette length.

In short, *Vance Space* is in the long tradition of guidebooks to the worlds of many other popular SF/fantasy authors. The major difference is that his is not a heavily illustrated gift-book edition but a small press chapbook that only a relative handful of Vance fans are likely to see. A labor of love, in other words, and one that should appeal to

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anyone who loves Vance's work, or who is just discovering it and would like a guide to further reading. Andre-Driussi invites corrections and commentary, though a cursory glance reveals no glaring errors.

In a better world (i.e., one organized according to my own taste), there would be enough Vance fans to justify the publication of this book by a large trade publisher, with plenty of artwork (Vance has gotten his share of excellent illustrations over the years), and the book would be prominently displayed in the front of bookstores. As it is, interested readers will have to obtain it directly from the author/publisher: Sirius Fiction, PO Box 460430, San Francisco, CA 94146. (Add $1.00 for postage in US; international airmail orders, add $3.00).

MIND MATTERS: EXPLORING THE WORLD OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

by James P. Hogan
Del Rey, $25.00 (hc)

James P. Hogan has written several science fiction novels dealing with artificial intelligence. Here he looks at the real-world progress and prospects of AI. Combining strong hard-science credentials with a willingness to defy received scientific opinion, he has written one of the more interesting in the recent flurry of books on this developing field.

Hogan begins his investigation with a group of scenarios ranging from a "smart" auto that can find its destination without human guidance to self-replicating robots that incorporate design improvements in newer models and thus display a sort of "evolution." (The latter idea was the basis of his 1983 novel, *Code of the Lifemaker*.) The scenarios are all (as of now) still within the realm of SF—but a future in which they will be possible seems much closer than it did only a couple of decades ago.

Then (very much in the style of Asimov's science essays, on which a lot of us armchair science watchers cut our teeth) Hogan takes us on a tour of the history of artificial intelligence. Highlights include Aristotelian logic (with its essentially mechanistic structure) and the Turing Test, which rates a computer's "intelligence" by its ability to mimic the responses of a human being. But the major advancements of artificial intelligence have taken place over the last three decades, which have seen the computer evolve from an expensive and clumsy apparatus available—and usable—only by specialists to an indispensable feature of everyday life, not only occupying millions of desktops and laptops around the world, but controlling automobiles and household appliances. On the cutting edge of computer science, we have seen the development of increasingly subtle and versatile programming languages, and machines capable of extremely high-speed performance. Remember, most of the machines that ran the Apollo moon program had less memory than today's game machines.

A benchmark event in this story, at least to the general public, is the development of chess computers, culminating in the victory of Deep Blue, an IBM computer optimized for the game, over world champion Gary Kasparov. The odds against this once seemed so long that one British grandmaster of the 1960s placed a large wager that no computer would ever defeat a human grandmaster in over-the-board play. Hogan summarizes the history of chess programs, with sample games from several computer systems pitted against human masters. But of course, the chess world had accepted the computer long before this event. Nowadays, every serious player has a chess program, with a large database to help prepare for matches and

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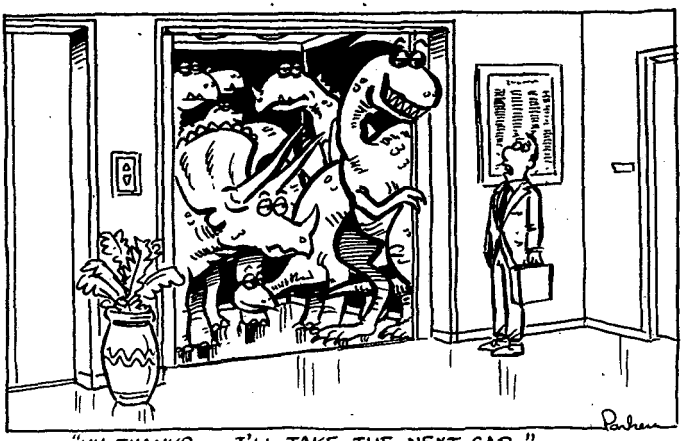
tournaments. In this spirit, Hogan wonders how formidable Kasparov and Deep Blue might be if they played as a team. . . .

Other chapters examine the progress of computers in three-dimensional model-building, of attempts to understand natural languages, and other simple tasks that humans take for granted but that pose genuine challenges to AI. Neural networks—still pretty much in their infancy—attempt to mimic the human brain on the hardware level. This represents a radical break with the simple straight-line approach of most current machines. Hogan gives due weight to the critics of AI, from such pioneer texts as *Frankenstein* and *R.U.R.* ("there are some things man was not meant to know") to modern skeptics like Roger Penrose (who rests his case on advanced mathematics and physics) and Hubert Dreyfuss (who builds on the humanist philosophical tradition, which posits that pure reason is inherently limited). Hogan summarizes their main criticisms without passing judgment; a reader so inclined can pursue the subject further in the very extensive bibliography.

To sum up, Hogan calls on the science fiction writer's predictive prerogative to look into the possible future of AI. A decent home computer can already outperform human experts in such fields as number-crunching or database management. Other areas will most likely remain human preserves for a long time; even the most optimistic researchers are cautious about predicting that robots or computers will ever replace the human brain as the primary vehicles for understanding our universe. But it looks as if they will have increasing roles in gathering, compiling, and doing preliminary analyses of the data we need to understand it. Finally, whatever consciousness machines may develop will be completely alien to our own, with goals and plans completely alien, as well.

Neither wildly optimistic nor utterly skeptical, Hogan gives the nonspecialist reader a solid introduction to one of the most fascinating "far-out" ideas to have made the transition from speculative fiction to workaday technology. AI still has a good ways to go to catch up with the more audacious predictions of SF writers, even those of several decades ago. *Mind Matters* is a good chance to figure out where things might be going before we actually get there. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Last chance to join the WorldCon for a lower advance rate. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107B Autumn Woods Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

JUNE 1998

12–14—**DeepSouthCon.** For info, write: **Box 94151, Birmingham AL 35220.** Or phone: **(205) 678-2112** (10 AM to 10 PM, *not collect*). *Con will be held in:* Birmingham AL *(if city omitted, same as in address) at the* Ramada Inn. *Guests will* include: Michael Bishop, David and Lori Dietrick, Robert (Buck) and Juanita Coulson, Wilson Arthur (Bob) Tucker.

12–14—**DucKon. (708) 827-5131.** O'Hare Ramada, Rosemont (Chicago) IL. G. Cook, P. Grubs, D. Iversen, A. Karesh.

12–14—**Jumpgate Jax. (AOL) jumpg8jax.** Radisson Riverwalk, Jacksonville FL. Jack McDevitt, Peggy Ranson.

12–14—**ElsterCon. (E-mail) braatz@rz.uni-leipzig.de.** Leipzig Germany. N. Griffith, Kim S. Robinson, J. von Puttkamer.

12–14—**Perry Rhodan Days. (Web) www/vpm.de/PerryRhodan/prtz/.** Bürgerhaus, Garching (Munich) Germany.

12–19—**Cruise Trek. (818) 597-7576.** Cruise ship Galaxy, sails from Vancouver BC to Alaska. E. Stillwell. Star Trek.

14–July 25—**Clarion. (Web) http://www.msu.edu/~lbs/clarion/.** Michigan State U., E. Lansing MI. Writers' workshop.

19–21—**Monster Bash. (412) 238-6436.** Holiday Inn, Monroeville (Pittsburgh) PA. Ackerman, R. Chaney, Harryhausen.

20–21—**AEUG. (E-mail) baka@gpu.srv.ualberta.ca.** University of Alberta, Edmonton AB. Anime.

22–July 31—**Odyssey. (603) 673-6234.** New Hampshire College, Mt. Vernon NH. Ellison, McKillip. Writers' workshop.

25–28—**MidWestCon, Sims, 34 Creekwood Sq., Glendale OH 45246. (Web) www.cfg.org/.** Blue Ash, Cincinnati. Relaxacon.

26–28—**ConEstoga, Box 54037, Tulsa OK 74155. (918) 836-5463.** Sheraton. Willis, Cherry, M. Simmons, the Satterfields.

26–28—**OutWorld, Box 160, Dacula GA 30211. (AOL) outworldx.** Harvey, Atlanta GA. E. Wujcik, E. Kramer. Media/games.

26–28—**Shore Leave, Box 6809, Towson MD 21285. (410) 496-4450.** Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. Trek and SF.

26–28—**Canada Nat'l. Anime Con, #0116, Box 187, 65 Front St. W., Toronto ON M5J 1E6. (416) 761-1760.** Convention Center.

JULY 1998

2–5—**WesterCon, Box 15471, San Diego CA 92175. (619) 463-5737.** Mission Valley Marriott. K. Kurtz, S. MacMillan, Dawe.

2–5—**Origins, 129 N. Hamilton Rd., Box 13500, Columbus OH 43213. (614) 856-3976.** *Hyatt. The year's big gaming meet.*

3–5—**InConJunction, Box 19776, Indianapolis IN 46219. (E-mail) incon@indy.net.** Resnick, DiFate, Rusch, Dean W. Smith.

3–5—**GayLaxiCon, Box 700392, Plymouth MI 48170. (AOL) gaylaxcon8.** Marriott, Troy MI. For gay fans & their friends.

3–5—***Anime Expo, 530 Showers Drive, Suite 7-287, Mt. View CA 94040. (818) 441-3653.*** *In Southern California.*

3–5—**InterConTact, Box 121, Blinden N-0313, Norway. (E-mail) elf@origo.no.** University of Oslo, Norway. Pat Cadigan.

AUGUST 1998

5–9—**BucCONeer, Box 314, Annapolis Junction MD 20701. (410) 534-8136.** Baltimore MD. WorldCon. $130 to 6/15; more later.

AUGUST 1999

26–29—**Conucopia, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Anaheim CA. Pournelle. The North American SF Con (NASFiC). $70.

SEPTEMBER 1999

2–6—**AussieCon 3, Box 266, Prospect Heights IL 60070.** Melbourne, Australia. Gregory Benford. The WorldCon. US$155.

AUGUST 2000

31–Sep. 4—**ChiCon 2000, Box 642057, Chicago IL 60664.** Bova, Eggleton, Baen, Turtledove, Passovoy. WorldCon. $125.

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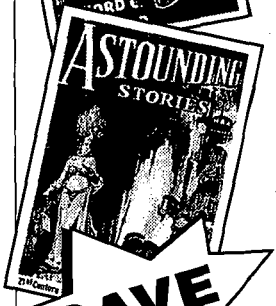

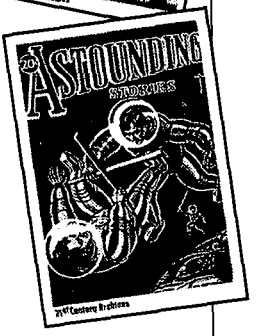

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

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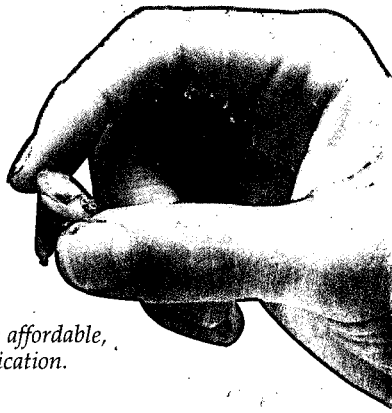

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